

FINAL DESTINATION

NEW LINE CINEMA



A NOVEL BY STEVEN A. ROMAN

DEAD MAN'S HAND

BASED ON CHARACTERS FROM THE MOTION PICTURE
"FINAL DESTINATION" CREATED BY JEFFREY REDDICK

PROLOGUE

Aldis Escobar had a feeling something was seriously wrong the moment he went to get on the elevator; the doors closed on him just as he was stepping inside.

The rubberized safety bar—the metal strip running down the length of the door, between the car and the floor entrance, that "warned" the elevator if something was stuck in the middle—caught him right down the center, from collar to crotch. Aldis gave out a strangled cry of pain as the bar slammed into his balls, then retracted.

The doors opened wide, and Aldis stumbled inside, clutching his aching crotch. "M-mother... fucker," he gasped. Just for spite, he kicked the base of the glass back wall of the car. The metal thrummed hollowly from the impact of the size-nine. "Fuck you!" he hissed through gritted teeth, unaware of the spittle falling on the lapels of his jacket. He lashed out with his foot again; this time, he got the window to vibrate.

The only response the machine gave toward its abuser, however, was to softly chime its bell. The red "down" arrows in the doorframe lit up and the doors closed. Aldis angrily punched the button for the basement, then went back to cupping his hands around his boys, and occasionally moaning. He was going to need an ice bag for his throbbing injury when he got home. Goddamn doors nearly cut me in half, he thought. Piece of shit. Wasn't maintenance supposed to make sure stuff like that didn't happen?

As the elevator descended, Aldis looked out through the glass walls at the incredible night scene that he knew he'd be able to enjoy a whole lot better were he not in such agonizing pain. Merlin's Tower was the tallest building in Las Vegas—hell, pretty much the tallest building in the entire western United States from what he'd heard, edging out the one hundred and eight storey Stratosphere across the Strip at one thousand two hundred and eight feet, and one hundred and fourteen stories. And the three elevators that ran up and down along tracks on the outside of the hotel/casino provided the best

view, day or night, of the neon oasis that stretched out all around it. Of course, it didn't beat the view from The Lady of the Lake, the seafood restaurant on the Tower's roof where Aldis worked as a waiter. From there, you could see all of the city, three hundred and sixty degrees, not just the limited angle you got in the elevators.

Still, looking down on the lights of the Strip from the glass-walled cars wasn't so bad either, in Aldis's opinion. In particular, there was plenty of Sin City to see from this elevator on the Tower's south side. From here, he could look out at the tents of Circus, Circus, the replica of the Eiffel Tower at the Paris, and far in the distance, the giant pyramid and Sphinx that comprised the Luxor. And even though it was just after four in the morning—the restaurant, as well as a good deal of the gambling metropolis, having closed for the night—there was still light traffic down on Las Vegas Boulevard, and people on the sidewalks. A twenty-four hour town this place was, and Aldis was happy living here. The girls he met were always hot (and most from out of town, so you could screw 'em and then not have to worry about any drama afterward), the rents were okay (if you didn't mind sharing an apartment with two asshole roommates), and the job paid pretty well (if you didn't mind working *for* assholes).

All in all, not bad living for a nineteen year-old who'd dropped out of high school in junior year.

Sure, there were times the work and the city got to him. Not as bad as it did to his old man, but that was his problem and he wasn't going to live here forever. He had dreams of a recording career, of making it big, and they didn't involve either croaking out shitty seventies love ballads on some reality show, like those pussy contestants on *American Idol*, or opening on the Strip for some over-the-hill hasbeen with groupies old enough to be Aldis's grandmother. No, he'd hooked up with a couple of righteous musicians looking to break out like him: Marco Silfen, a club deejay who could tear it up on a pair of turntables and a mixer, and Ellie Stanfield, a pianist at the Turbo Lounge over on Colorado Avenue. With her on keyboards, Marco on the tables, and Aldis on lead vocals, Trojan (a name he thought reflected their plan to "sneak into the music business) would show the Vegas stiffs how music was done right.

The dream popping into his thoughts like that did wonders for easing the ache in his nut sack; it even brought a smile to his lips. Yeah, Aldis thought, he wasn't long for this town. With any luck, Trojan would be rolling into L A's club scene before the year was out. A few more practice sessions, and they'd be ready to take the act out on the road.

Aldis reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his iPod, filled with an eclectic mix of music from J-Kwon to Beethoven (he had a serious liking for Ludwig Van's Ninth Symphony). He unwound the tiny white earphones and put them on, then started running through his latest selection of downloaded tunes.

Luckily for Aldis, the elevator wasn't stopping on any floor, so he didn't have to worry about annoying hotel guests with the throbbing noise spilling out of the earphones. Then again, he really wasn't supposed to be riding in any of the main cars, even after hours. As an employee of the hotel, it was required he use the service elevator on the north side of the Tower to go to and from the restaurant and the staff locker rooms in the basement. But the service car ran inside the hotel, and the only view it provided was of four metal walls that reminded him of the inside of a dumpster. Not that, you know, he knew what the inside of a dumpster looked like from personal experience.

Okay, maybe he did. But it only happened once, and there'd been a good reason for it.

And so what if he used the guest elevators when he got off work? Did he give a shit about upsetting some drunken tourist trying to sneak out a hooker at four in the morning? Oh, hell, no. He had more important things to think about. Aldis Escobar's star was on the rise, baby, and soon enough every motherfucker on the planet would know it. Getting balled out by Joey Congers, the Tower's night manager, for not taking the right elevator when nobody else was making use of it didn't do dick to scare him.

Speaking of dicks, Aldis suddenly realized his didn't seem to hurt as much anymore. Maybe the music was helping, because he wasn't feeling as much pain as before. He started cautiously moving to the beat, shuffling around the car with his eyes closed. For him, the beat

was all there was right now, and the eye-popping view of the Las Vegas night was immediately forgotten...

...until the elevator did a little shimmy of its own around the forty-second floor, and momentarily slipped from its tracks.

The jump threw Aldis against the window behind him, then his attention was focused totally on the street so very far below, especially when the glass popped out of its frame and took a tumble. He screamed as his momentum nearly threw him out of the car. The desert wind tugged at his jacket, like it was trying to force him into a race with the large glass pane to see who hit the pavement first.

Oddly enough, painfully enough, it was his balls that saved him. They slammed into the waist-high safety railing just as Aldis was about to start his dive, and brought a swift end to his forward motion. Another scream flowed from his wide-open mouth—this one was high-pitched and girlish, like he'd just turned castrato—and he tumbled back into the car. The fetal position his legs drew into was an automatic response to the searing pain now orbiting his pelvis; Aldis wasn't even aware he'd done it.

Then the elevator was back on its track, continuing its descent like nothing had happened. No alarms had gone off. Security hadn't called on the intercom to find out if anyone was in the car, and Aldis hadn't heard the glass panel hitting the street. Maybe the wind had caught it and carried it a few blocks away; it was certainly high enough up for something like that to occur. But you'd think a piece of glass that big, smashing down *anywhere*, would get somebody's attention.

Or maybe he just hadn't heard its crash. That was possible, because as he tried to gain control of his ragged breathing—and the racking sobs that shook his body—he realized his earphones were still plugged in.

The music piping into his ears was moody and melodramatic. Normally, Aldis would have tossed it off as typical goth music, shit about death and destruction and the like, but right there, and that moment, it made a weird kind of sense. As he lay on the carpeted floor of the car, using his jacket sleeves to wipe away the tears

running down his face, he slowly realized what was going on, as irrational as it sounded the fucking elevator had just tried to kill him.

Okay, so maybe not the elevator itself—that was just too crazy a notion, even for a guy who couldn't think straight because his nuts felt like they'd swelled up to the size of grapefruits. But *something* had caused the doors to close, to try and crush him, and *something* had tried to toss him out of the car, and he didn't think any of it had to do with faulty wiring or the track being out of alignment. It'd never slipped its groove before, as far as he knew.

Maybe that Grim Reaper stalking-shit had some truth to it.

Not everyone saw it that way, as he found out a few minutes later. The car had reached the basement without further incident, and Aldis managed to pick himself up off the floor and stagger out of it. Every step had been sheer agony, and he half expected the doors to make one more attempt at playing nutcracker; surprisingly, they hadn't. But then he had the misfortune to run into his shift manager, Tony Augustino, who could be a real ballbuster in his own right.

"What—so *you're* the prick who dropped that pane o' glass in the swimming pool?" was his initial response after Aldis told him about his near-death experience in the Elevator from Hell. "Didn't Mr Congers fuckin' tell you not to go ridin' in the fuckin' guest elevators? You're supposed to use the fuckin' service one! How many times you gotta be told that?"

Augustino was pure old style Vegas—a rumpled old Pisan in his sixties who hailed back to the days when the Mob ran the town. Maybe he used to be somebody, but that was eighty pounds and a natural brown hair color ago. Now he was just a pathetic reflection of the "goodfella" he used to be a lifetime ago—and still thought he was.

Not that Aldis really gave a shit about that, what with his aching nut sack and his brush with oblivion. He was thrown by the response he got from the old fart—and a little angry. "Wait a minute. You're givin' me shit about what elevator I gotta take, when *I'm* tellin' you the fuckin' thing almost killed me?"

"It ain't your job to tell me *shit!*" Tony snapped. "You're a fuckin' busboy—"

"Waiter," Aldis corrected him.

"You're supposed to do what you're told!" Tony concluded, ignoring him.

"Yeah?" Aldis pointed at the elevator. "And what if one o' the guests had been in it just now, and *they'd* taken a dive out of the window instead o' me almost takin' it? Would you be tellin' Mr Congers it was their own goddamn fault? You oughtta be *thankin'* me for findin' out something's wrong with it, not bitin' my fuckin' head off!"

"Lissen, smartass. You shut that fuckin' mouth of yours, or I'll shut it for you," Tony warned. "I've taken all the shit from you I'm gonna take for one night—we're done." He turned to walk away, stopped, apparently figured he *wasn't* done just yet, and wheeled back around. He thrust a sausage-like finger in Aldis's face. "And don't think for one fuckin' minute I'm gonna let you put *my* ass in a sling with Mr Congers 'cause you were joyridin' around in a guest car and went bustin' out a window. 'Cause you *know* he'll try and make me the fall guy, what with me bein' your supervisor an' all." He jabbed the finger into his subordinate's chest, hard, like he was trying to poke a hole in it. "But I ain't goin' down alone, All-diss—and you can *take* that to the motherfuckin' bank."

"But what about the elevator?" Aldis asked. "What're you gonna do about that?"

The index finger levitated up from his chest, back to hovering within inches of his face. "You let maintenance worry about that, busboy," Tony replied. "Just get on your fuckin' knees when you get home tonight, and thank God that window you popped didn't kill somebody, otherwise you'd be talkin' to the cops right about now." He leaned in close, apparently to emphasize his point, but the only things Aldis focused on were Augustino's yellowed teeth. The asshole needed a good flossing. "Want some advice? You should be worried more about keepin' your fuckin' job than fuckin' around where you're not supposed to be, and then expectin' other people to clean up your shit."

"Is that a fact?" Aldis said hotly.

"Yeah, that's a fact. And if you don't like it," Tony gestured toward a nearby emergency exit door, "you can walk the fuck outta here right

now an' don't come back."

"I got a better idea," Aldis replied with a sneer. "Maybe I'll walk the fuck outta here right now and go straight to Mr Congers. Let him know all about what happened. How you think he's gonna react when I tell him I tried givin' a warnin' about one of the elevators breakin' down, and my supervisor told me to fuck off and mind my own business? You think he's gonna li—"

Tony's hands closed around his throat before he could finish the sentence. Aldis grunted as he was slammed against the wall. The back of his head bounced off the smooth concrete, the impact sounding like someone striking a ripe melon. Bright little stars and swirling black dots swarmed across his vision.

"You wanna fuck with me, Escobar?" Tony growled. "I thought you was a smart boy."

"Smarter than... you... you fuck," Aldis gasped.

Tony gave his windpipe a little two-handed shake. "No, you ain't. You're just like any other dumb fuckin' wetback stinkin' up this city, Escobar. And the desert's full o' dumb fuckin' wetbacks who thought they were smarter than guys like me—you get me?"

"I ain't... a Mexican," Aldis replied through gritted teeth. He pulled at Augustino's hands. "And how smart's... it make you... when you're doin' time... in prison... for killin' a... waiter?"

They locked eyes for a moment, then Augustino apparently saw the logic in the young waiter's argument and backed off. He released Aldis, and dropped his hands to his sides. Aldis gasped for air and rubbed his sore throat. Now he had something to take his mind off the ache in his nether regions.

"You caught a break, Escobar," Tony commented. "That's 'cause I'm such a fuckin' reasonable guy." Again with the warning finger. "But you crack wise with me again, or you go runnin' your mouth to Mr Congers an' make any trouble, an' you'll be standin' in an unemployment line in a fuckin' wheelchair. Your hear me, busboy?"

Standin' in a wheelchair? It didn't make a goddamn bit of sense, but Aldis got the gist of the message, and knew that trying to correct Tony's mangled warning would be a real dumbass move. All he wanted to do now was get the fuck out of the hotel. Two close

encounters with death were more than enough for one night; best to make tracks before the old saying about the third time being the charm turned out to be for real.

"Yeah, I hear ya, Tony," he said. "I got it."

Augustino placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, like they were pals again. "Good boy. Smart boy. Now, you run on home an' stop your worryin'. I'll give maintenance a call, let 'em know what's what with the elevator. They'll have this whole thing fixed up before Mr Congers even knows it happened." His hand His hand moved around Aldis's shoulders, to roughly draw him into a tight, not so friendly embrace. "But you're gonna stay off the fuckin' guest cars from now on," he growled. "We clear on that, All-diss?"

Aldis nodded. Anything to wrap this up and get the fuck away from this psycho *Godfather* reject. "Yeah, Tony. You don't have to tell me twice."

Augustino smiled. "Awright, then. So I guess we're all good, as you kids say, right?" He slapped the waiter on the back. Aldis felt his teeth rattle from the impact. "Now, g'wan. I'll see ya tomorrow."

Aldiss hurried to his locker without a backward a glance, grabbed his knapsack, and booked out of the hotel basement as quickly as possible, through an exit door that led to the underground parking garage. His hands shook a little as he pulled his car keys from a zippered pouch on the front of the bag.

Fuck it, he thought. Fuck him, fuck this hotel, fuck everything. He rubbed his throat again. Goddamn asshole might've fucked up my voice; coulda cost me my whole fuckin' singin' career. Maybe I oughtta have a doctor look at it...

As he climbed inside his red Mini Cooper, the nervousness began to fade, replaced by an all-consuming anger. Aldis slammed the driver's side door closed, then sat gripping the wheel in a stranglehold for a few seconds. His lips pulled back in a snarl.

I don't need to put up with this shit, he decided. Why should I? So, I rode in one of the guest cars—BFD. The damn thing almost killed me, right? That fat old bastard oughtta be grateful I gave him the heads-up. But does he *act* grateful? Oh, hell, no. He tries to snap my fuckin' neck, and tells me to keep my mouth shut!

He keyed the ignition, stomped on the gas pedal, and tore out of the garage, onto Paradise Road, heading south. The first pink glimmers of sunrise were coloring the east, but Aldis was in no mood to admire the view as he stopped at the red light on the corner of Sahara Avenue.

Maybe I'll talk to Marco and Ellie later, he thought. See if there's any openings where they work. I don't need to take that psycho shit from Augustino anymore. And if that elevator acts up again and tries to kill some other poor bastard... well, I tried to warn them, right? Not my fault if Tony fuckin' Augustino wants to keep it a secret. Let 'im take it to his fuckin' grave, for all I care.

Aldis was so caught up in his internal monologue, so focused on making plans for when he showed up for his shift that night, when he'd tell Augustino to go screw himself and then walk out of the Tower forever, that he never saw the van racing across Sahara Avenue as its driver tried to beat the changing traffic signal; didn't notice the driver lose control of the vehicle, and send it hurtling across the lanes right at him—until it was too late to get out of the way.

The van hopped the curb, spun in the air once, twice, long enough for Aldis to see the terrified expressions of the teenaged driver behind and the girl who sat beside him, and then it slammed down on the roof of the Mini Cooper.

The impact crushed Aldis against the steering wheel, and he screamed as his ribcage shattered, the fragments of bone puncturing his lungs, his heart. Some pieces erupted outward, through his chest, to stab like skeletal fingers at the stereo buttons on the steering column. The only sounds Aldis could hear were the explosive coughs that ripped from his throat, each one spurting blood across the dashboard.

Dark, thick clots bumped their way across the leather-upholstered dash as they were carried along by the flow. Then they, along with the seemingly never-ending river of blood that poured from Aldis's mouth, cascaded down to join the pool of bodily fluids already forming on the floor mat under his feet.

As he lay dying, Aldis felt the desert breeze swirl through the shattered windshield. It stroked his blood-spattered cheeks, his lips, cooled his forehead with its gentle caress. The first thing, the oddest thing, that came to mind was that he finally knew what people meant when they said they'd felt the touch of Death.

So, it was true, he realized in those last few seconds of life. The third time really was the charm.

ONE

It was supposed to be the happiest moment of her life. But when Allie Goodwin finally woke up in that Las Vegas hotel room after a margarita-fueled night of debauchery, she knew right away just how truly screwed she was.

Ever since she was a little girl growing up in Schiller, Illinois, Almarine Faith Goodwin had dreamed of her wedding, the day she would pledge her undying love to the boy with whom she'd spend the rest of her life, and he would make the same vow to her. She'd practised it dozens of times with her Barbies and Kens, the ceremony attended by stuffed animals and dolls on one side of the aisle (friends of the bride), and her brother Archie's action figures on the other (the groom's party). GI Joe with Kung-Fu Grip was the best man—since he could actually hold the ring—while Malibu Stacy was the maid-of-honor. The reception was held at the tea party playset. From there, the newly-weds jetted off to London or Paris or Rome for their honeymoon, before settling down in Barbie's Townhouse to begin their lives as a couple. It was how Allie had always imagined her own wedding would be, with real people in attendance at the church instead of toys, of course. But everything else was exactly how she pictured it, including the beautiful powder blue, fairy-tale princess gown she'd wear, its train running the length of the aisle from the altar to the front door. And her husband would be whichever movie or TV star she had a crush on at the time. The notion of Tom Selleck's *Magnum, PI* whisking her off to Hawaii occupied her thoughts for a couple of weeks. Then teenaged Will Wheaton from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* was high on the list for a while. Even Pee-Wee Herman showed up at the altar at one point.

Such were the wildly illogical fancies of an eight year-old girl's mind in the late 1980s.

And yet, though the years passed, and she made the sometimes awkward, sometimes challenging transition from daddy's little girl to daddy's rebellious teen, the dream never truly faded away, although the imaginary suitors certainly did. She stored it in the back of her

thoughts for safekeeping, cherished it like a priceless family heirloom, waiting for the day she could bring it back out after she'd finally met the right man. It was only a matter of who that man would be.

She just never expected it to be an ex-boyfriend who'd been drinking as much as she had the night she'd brought up the whole idea of a quickie marriage after they'd arrived in Las Vegas. Or that he still wanted to do it after they'd sobered up. Or that the ceremony would be held, not in a church with friends and family present, but in a shabby little chapel a mile off the Vegas Strip, attended by the elderly, blue-haired woman who owned the place and her Casio organ-playing daughter, and presided over by a minister dressed like Elvis.

Barbie and Ken sure never had a wedding like that.

There was a soft *click* in the darkness as the clock-radio's alarm snapped on; she'd set it her first night in the hotel room to tune in to a local classic rock radio station, so she wouldn't be shocked awake by a shrill buzzer. The radio clicked on and Allie found herself halfway through a familiar song.

"We gotta get outta this place," Allie quietly sang along, "if it's the last thing we ever do."

A soft groan beside her cut her off. Tom—the words *my husband* exploded in her mind like a psychic grenade being detonated—rolled over from his side of the bed to snuggle up. Apparently, he was awake and ready for another round of marital bliss; the way he was rubbing against her thigh was evidence of that. She contemplated pushing him away, but rejecting his advances seemed like such a waste, and the next time she did something like that, as the saying went, would be the *first* time. She inhaled the musky scent of him: a heady, inviting concoction of sweat and sex and Bod cologne that made her a little dizzy. Or was that just the hangover asserting itself? Whatever. She rolled over and pulled him on top of her.

Was getting married a smart idea or a stupid impulse, she dimly wondered? Well, right now, who gave a shit? She *wanted* him, and that was all that mattered, for the moment. They could always figure

things out later—like after they'd given the box springs in the mattress another good, hard test-drive.

But then he had to go and ruin it by opening his stupid mouth.

"Good morning, Mrs Gaines," he whispered in her ear.

That was it. The spell was broken. Allie pushed him off and rolled out of bed. She'd been *okay* with their crazy plan—especially since it had been hers to begin with—from the time they paid the marriage license at the courthouse, through the initial shock that had set in after Elvis had pronounced them "man and wife, a-huh". She had been willing to come to terms with the possible consequences, eventually, as long as she didn't have to deal with it right away. But for him to shatter her illusions *just as the two of them were getting intimate*, and spoil it all by slapping her in the face with the reality of the situation... well, there wasn't a chance in hell of him getting laid now.

She turned on the nightstand lamp and winced as the sudden glare assaulted her darkness-accustomed eyes. She held up a hand to block her view of the lamp and waited for the black spots to stop dancing across her vision.

"Hey!" Tom said. "What the fuck?"

Allie turned around to find him kneeling on the bed beside her. There was something so comical about the angry, confused look on his face, that she couldn't help but smile.

Tom, however, apparently didn't see the humor in the situation. "You wanna tell me what the hell that was about, Allie?" he demanded. "Ten seconds ago, you were all ready for takeoff."

"Yeah, but then I decided to abort the mission," she replied dryly, then shrugged. "It happens sometimes."

"Not with *you*, it doesn't," he snapped. "You're *always* up for a good time."

The comment stung as though he'd smacked her in the face, and the breath seemed to rush out of her all at once.

"And what the fuck is that supposed to mean?" she snarled. She could feel her cheeks burning with anger.

Tom disentangled himself from the cotton sheets and stepped from the bed. "Oh, come on, Allie! I remember how wild you used to

be. That's why we broke up, remember? One guy never seemed to be enough for you; you were always ready for round two."

Allie gritted her teeth. "Is that so?" she said. Well, it kinda was, but she wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of confirming her prior acts.

Tom nodded. "Oh, yeah. And you're *still* like that! You were practically humpin' my leg all the way up in the elevator the day we checked in here—you made me so hard I could barely make it to the room."

"Really. Then I must've missed the part where you begged me to stop," she commented sarcastically. She waved a hand at him to cut him off before he could reply. "No, wait, you *did* beg me to stop. Something about how your dick was gonna snap off if you kept going, right?" She nodded, agreeing with herself. She'd laughed when he told her that; not much on stamina, her Tom. *That* was the real reason they'd broken up four years ago, he just couldn't keep up with her, and it had been an embarrassment for him. "But that was after we'd been going at it for a couple of hours, wasn't it?"

"Hey, now, I'm not saying I didn't enjoy it," Tom countered, "but, Jesus, Allie, you're like some unstoppable fuck-machine once you get going!"

"*I'm* a 'fuck-machine'?" she yelled. If her stare had been a gun, he would have been lying dead at her feet. "Who was it just now rubbing his lumber against my leg to try and start a fire?"

"Okay, okay, that was me, you're right," he said quickly, the words practically tripping over his tongue. "I'm sorry, really, really sorry. I'm an asshole, okay? You know I'd never mean anything like that." Was there a slight whining tone in his voice? God, she hoped not. Tom always sounded like a little kid when he wasn't getting his way.

"Then what *do* you mean?" she demanded.

"It's," he drew a deep breath, then slowly exhaled. "Look, Allie, it's just that you never know when to slow down. Even when we dated back in college, everything had to be in excess, *especially* when it came to sex. It's like you're always moving at a hundred miles an hour, and the rest of the world has to try and catch up."

"So I like to *live*," she said hotly. "What's wrong with that?"

"There's nothing wrong with it, but you gotta learn to pace yourself, Allie," he replied. "I mean, you're only, what, twenty-five? You got a whole life ahead of you, as my mom would say, y'know? But you keep acting like you've gotta get everything in before it's too late." He paused. "Too late for *what*, though?"

There was some truth to that, she suddenly realized. She lived hard, had loved even harder, for years, but why, exactly? It probably had to do with the attitude she'd adopted after she got out of the hospital following *that night*: an "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die" approach that had colored her outlook on the world ever since. A brush with the possibility of nonexistence hadn't made her more appreciative of her life, it just made it crystal clear how frighteningly mortal she was. And not someone with "a whole life ahead of them", who used to think they were invulnerable, untouchable, liked to be reminded of that.

She screwed her eyes shut, forcing the dark thoughts back into the recesses of her mind. Now she needed something to take her mind off of that fucking night.

"So, what're you saying, Tom?" she asked, and stepped close to him. "That I'm some kind of nymphomaniac? That I can't go ten seconds without thinking about how I need some guy boning me?"

She placed a hand on his chest, traced her index finger along the edge of his pectoral muscles, tossed her head back slightly to shake out her dark mane, an idea she got from watching a stripper on an episode of *Real Sex* she caught late one night on HBO.

Holy shit, she thought. That move really *does* work.

Tom paused, as though gathering his thoughts, or carefully choosing the right words that would ensure he'd get his piece of ass. "Maybe," he finally admitted. "But it's not like that's a bad thing," he quickly added. "A lot of guys would kill to be in my place, and I'm sure as hell not complaining." He smiled slyly. "I guess that's one of the reasons I was willing to marry you, even if it was the booze saying, 'I do' instead of me."

There—yet another metaphorical slap of reality.

"Goddammit!" she roared as she threw her hands in the air. "You had to go and do it again, didn't you?" She stomped off toward the

bathroom.

"What?" he said, following her. "What'd I do now?"

"You know!" She paused in the doorway, then spun around to face him. "Bring up the whole goddamn marriage thing!" She slammed the door in his face.

"What? Like that was my idea!" Tom said from the other side of the door. "I'm not the one who said, 'Hey, let's get married! when we got to Vegas."

She balled her hands into tight fists on the edge of the bathroom sink. "No, but I didn't hear you say it was a bad idea, either."

"What the hell did you expect?" he countered. "I was drunk when you brought it up, for Christ's sake! Everything sounds like a good idea when you're drunk!"

She screwed her eyes tightly shut, and chewed her bottom lip for a moment. "And when you weren't drunk?" she asked quietly.

There was a long pause. A really long pause that turned into a heavy, uncomfortable silence. She'd started to think that maybe he'd dozed off against the wall, when he finally muttered, "I still thought it was a good idea." Another pause, shorter this time. "Didn't you?" he asked.

That brought her up short. Her eyes popped open in surprise, and she glanced at the door, as though she could see him on the other side. It hadn't sounded like he was throwing shit back at her, more like he was looking for confirmation from her.

"Yeah," she had to admit. "I guess I did."

A little smile tugged at the corners of Allie's lips. It *had* seemed like a good idea at the time, even after she'd said: "I do." There was part of her that wondered if maybe tying the knot with Tom might turn out all right in the end. Once you got past the sexual stamina issue, the two of them had really been the quintessential "cute couple" back in college; "like you guys are joined at the fuckin' hip," as her best friend, Talia Kraft, once commented in the dorm room they shared. "Y'oughtta just move in together so I can get some sleep. At least then I'd be able to study without all that screamin' and moanin' keepin' me up at night."

That hadn't lasted for much longer, but the fact she and Tom had remained friends after they broke up, that he'd been the first guy she called when she got the sudden crazy idea to hop a plane to Vegas and try her hand at poker, and that he'd actually agreed to go with her on no more than a moment's notice, proved there was still something between them. It was a sort of yin and yang equation: Tom, the straitlaced, highly responsible one; she, the wild, impulsive one. She pulled him out of his conservative shell to get him to try new things, and he reined her in when she started getting out of control. They balanced one another in a way none of their other relationships ever had—at least that's how it was when they were both sober. Considering what their trip to Margaritaville had set in motion their first night in town, it was clear he could be just as bad as she was when he wasn't feeling any pain. It was funny, in a way; she never remembered him being like that.

"Allie? You okay in there?" She could hear the concern in Tom's muffled voice through the door. It sounded like he'd taken a second or two to cool off; now, he apparently wanted to patch things up.

Slowly, her anger faded too, and she unclenched her fists to lay the palms of her hands along the marble edge of the sink. She lifted up her head to look at herself in the mirror. Her make-up was a mess—the eye shadow had smudged, so it looked — like she'd been socked hard in the left eye—and she had a case of "bed hair" so tragic even a bottle of relaxer would have a hard time subduing it. At least her lipstick hadn't smeared.

Allie turned on the faucets and started running water into the basin. First, she'd deal with her appearance; then, she and Tom needed to sit down and talk about what they were going to do next.

The honeymoon, figuratively speaking, was over. Allie shook her head and chuckled softly at the bad joke.

"Allie?"

"Yeah, I'm... fine, Tom," she said. "I'll be out in a second."

She glanced down, and realized she was still wearing her watch, the dial always worn on the inside part of her wrist. She turned her arm to look at the face: 8:36am.

Allie sighed. Married just under twenty-eight hours, and already they'd had their first fight. How abso-fuckin'-lutely romantic.

TWO

Arlen Ploog was Death Incarnate—at least according to his monthly bank account statements. Put a pair of dice in his hand, give him a questionable tip about an upcoming horse race, unwrap a fresh deck of playing cards within fifteen feet of him, and you could practically hear his savings beg for mercy as their financial life was drained away, sometimes in a matter of hours. And it didn't help any that the city he'd chosen to make his home was Las Vegas, Nevada, the neon-brightened center of the gambling universe.

Not that his finances were ever that healthy to start with; the last time Arlen had held a steady, good-paying job, the Berlin Wall was still standing. But that was all right, as he often told the few people who ever showed an interest in him—usually croupiers and card dealers and fellow gamblers, and that was only because they had to put up with his stories as penance for taking his money. He was a simple guy with simple needs, he'd say. Give him a roof over his head and a couple square meals a day, and he was content. Whether he said it to convince them or himself was always the unspoken question, and one he had no real desire to answer.

Still, he found ways to make ends meet, working the second shift at a twenty-four hour laundromat near the intersection of Industrial Road and New York Avenue. It was almost within spitting distance of the Stratosphere, the second tallest building in the city after construction on Merlin's Tower had wrapped up last year right across the Strip. Arlen knew running a coin-operated laundry was about as close as he'd ever get to owning his own casino, and he played up the angle, if only to amuse himself. Everybody in this town played some sort of bigger-than-life role, after all, hid their true identities behind an entertainer's mask, so why should he be any different?

So once Arlen started his shift at 5pm, he treated the patrons like guests, greeting them as they came in and thanking them for coming as they left, occasionally repeating the lame joke about how, unlike the Luxor or the Golden Nugget, the "winnings" at the Big Apple

Laundromat came in the form of clean clothes and fluffy sheets that smelled like springtime. Newcomers always smiled and thanked him for the attention; the regulars tended to ignore him, and spent the hour or so it took to do their loads playing the nickel slots positioned near the front door. And when his shift was over at 1:00am, and the neon lights of the city were fully competing with the moon and stars for dominance of the desert sky, Arlen handed the keys and the coin changer on his belt to the overnight manager, Bartolo Sanchez, then headed off to take advantage of a cheap dinner at Merlin's buffet line. A couple cups of coffee, some steak, mashed potatoes (no gravy, but lots of butter), and a slice of apple pie, and he was fueled for the drive back to his apartment and a few hours' sleep. He'd usually get up around six or seven and work his way over to the Strip to begin his "other" job: losing a fair amount of his wages at the poker tables. When the money ran out, it was back to the apartment for a bite to eat, usually a bowl of instant Ramen noodles, and a nap, before it was time to head out to the laundromat.

Then wash, rinse, repeat the cycle. Such were the exciting days and star-filled nights of Arlen Ploog

It wasn't as if killing eight hours in a laundry was the first menial job he'd ever worked, though. He'd had enough experiences in his life—from gravedigger and dishwasher to motel manager and encyclopedia salesman—to know that he'd always find a way to pay the bills and have food on the table. That kind of "I'll do anything within reason for a buck" survival mentality had served him well enough all these years. Enough to finance the journey that took him cross-country from a rundown Jersey City apartment to an equally rundown Sin City motel room, and still end up with some coin in his pockets when he got there.

The problem, though, was in keeping that coin in his pockets. The Meadows, what "Las Vegas" basically translated to from Spanish, was a town full of people looking to separate him from his cash, and not even Arlen Ploog could resist the temptations they offered: the jackpots, the grand prizes, the large payouts. And like so many others before him, he truly believed that if he could catch that One Big Break, get dealt that one winning hand, pull down on that one golden

lever, the pile of shit his life had amounted to thus far would magically turn to gold.

But with the way his pursuit of Lady Luck had panned out up to this point, he could have been just as well served by staying in Jersey and pulling on his turnip night and day. It would have amounted to pretty much the same thing, except he'd be in control of how hard he was getting jerked.

Well, at least the scenery was better in his new digs... if having a direct view into the bedroom of one of the few good-looking hookers left on East Fremont Street counted. Not that he was complaining. "The Imperial" probably sounded to tourists like a ritzy place to hang your hat when they came across its listing among Vegas's multitude of hotels and motels, and maybe it had been at some point. But to look at it now, you'd know right away the dive hadn't seen any major renovations since the Rat Pack raised hell on the Strip, and the neighborhood surrounding it wasn't too far behind. "Urban blight", it used to be called. And for a city that prided itself on its glamorous appearance, dumps like the Imperial were a major embarrassment, and a constant reminder that not all the make-up and boa feathers in the Meadows could hide every blemish on this aging showgirl of a town.

The weather was nicer, too, if you could tolerate the withering daytime temperatures and the occasional "hundred-year flood". That was when the rains swept in from over the mountains to dump enough water on the city to flood the streets and turn the shopping mall at Caesars Palace into a miniature re-creation of Venice. For something that supposedly happened once a century, Arlen could count at least two times he'd been caught in one of those downpours during the decade he'd lived here. It was a wonder nobody had ever drowned when the highway underpasses filled with the runoff.

And the rents were less stressful on the wallet, if you didn't mind living downtown, a crime-ridden area east of the northern end of Las Vegas Boulevard that seemed to rely on drug dealing and prostitution for income as much as the casinos depended on slot machines and blackjack. The mayor had been yammering for years about how he was gonna clean up downtown, was gonna convince

the big casino owners and real estate developers to open brand-new hotels and high-priced condominiums along East Fremont; was gonna eliminate crime and drugs and prostitution. Blah, blah, blah.

The next mayor to get voted in would probably be promising the same things.

It hadn't taken Arlen long to get the lay of the land once he'd found a place to call home. As the towering neon sign out front proclaimed, the Imperial specialized in daily, weekly, and monthly rentals, and offered "air conditioning, switchboard, and free television", all the amenities a man could ask for in low-cost housing. Well, *almost* all the amenities. Better locks on the doors would've been nice; Arlen wound up replacing his after the second break-in cost him his VCR, his boom box, and a six-pack of new socks he'd purchased the day before. He hadn't even gotten the chance to try them on first.

Complaining to the Imperial's management didn't do any good, and reporting it to the cops seemed like a waste of time. Besides, Las Vegas PD had more important things to focus on. According to the papers, members of Los Angeles's most notorious street gangs, the Crips and Bloods, often made weekend trips to Vegas to keep the Fremont Street trade going, not that there ever seemed to be the slightest indication that sales might be dropping off. You couldn't walk a hundred feet in any direction without running into a dealer asking if you were okay, if you were "straight". And Arlen had learned to politely but firmly say yes in answer and move on, careful to avoid making eye contact, in case that action might be misinterpreted by the dealer and lead to a messy confrontation. Arlen certainly wasn't looking to become yet another crime statistic; there were already enough deaths in Vegas each year without adding another body to the morgue's coffers.

As for the ladies of the night, the only places to find the really hot chicks were near the big hotels, and most of those girls wouldn't give a second glance to a bony, sallow-skinned guy with nicotine-stained teeth and a suit that went out of style when *Miami Vice* dropped out

of syndicated reruns. Actually, that wasn't entirely true. They probably *would* give him a second look if he had a sizeable bankroll to flash at them—ugly is ugly, but throw enough cash at a hooker and even the most grotesque fucker can look like Prince Charming—if she squints really hard. Problem was, Arlen never had a wad so big he'd be able to find out what sort of corrective lenses Benjamin Franklin could buy on the Strip. Mostly, he and Andrew Jackson had to settle for the myopic second—and third—stringers who shuffled along Las Vegas Boulevard, offering a Fremont Street experience of a whole other kind.

That's why it was such a pleasant surprise to discover one of his "neighbors" plied her trade just across from his apartment, and that she didn't look like some burned-out crack whore waiting for a fix. "Tina," she called herself (not her real name, of course), and Arlen had fallen deeply in lust with her the moment he'd set eyes on her blue-minidressed curves. He'd always had a thing for Asian girls (why, he'd never been able to figure out), and this particular beauty had everything going for her: great ass, nice titties, and a decent face; didn't overdo the makeup so she'd wind up looking like a cross between a circus clown and Tammy Faye Baker. Had chestnut-brown hair that fell past her shoulders, and it didn't look like she used extensions, or wore a wig. And she was tall; Tina probably had an inch on Arlen, even without the three-inch soles on her boots that made her tower over him.

She lived across the back courtyard from Arlen, and he'd always assumed she'd either never realized that curtains were meant to block nosy neighbors from spying on her private business, or just didn't give a shit if they watched. Maybe she got off on voyeurs, he figured, the sexual acrobatics she performed while working on some trick were definitely more interesting than a lot of the crap on TV. And watching a beautiful Asian woman in her late twenties/early thirties, dressed like a Japanese schoolgirl and going down on a guy with all the gusto of a starving man at a Nathan's hotdog eating contest, just never seemed to lose its appeal.

About three months after he moved in, he finally got to meet her. It happened in the lobby of the hotel. He was heading back to his

apartment on a rare night off from work; she was standing near the front desk. He recognized her right away; she didn't, but then, most people rarely took notice of him. She asked him if he'd like a little "sucky-sucky," in probably one of the worst "me so horny" Asian hooker voices he'd ever heard, and Arlen couldn't help but point it out. To his surprise, she hadn't gotten angry; she'd even laughed, as a matter of fact. She explained she put on the voice because most johns wanted an "exotic" girl to fuck, and that had been the first thing to pop into her mind. It seemed to work, though; Arlen had been the first guy in eight years to figure it out.

But just because he'd seen through her playacting didn't mean he was any less inclined to take advantage of her offer. Andrew Jackson and his buddy, Abe Lincoln, made a short road trip from his wallet to her purse, and she spent the next twenty minutes on Arlen's payroll.

There was no doubt about his choice of partner this time; this pro was *all* woman, and not a wig or hair extension in sight.

It was the first time in quite a while that he'd actually felt like a winner, as pleasurable short-lived as the experience had been.

Afterward, they chatted a bit as they tidied up. Tina didn't actually live at the Imperial, which made a lot of sense. A smart pro, as Arlen knew, never brought a john home with her—there was always the chance something bad might happen if a guy knew too much about his "date"; being stalked was a rarity among prostitutes, but it did happen now and then, usually with disturbing results. Not to Tina, though. She didn't live in the neighborhood or so she said—and she had an arrangement with the Imperial's night manager: in exchange for a percentage of her take and the occasional "pity fuck" (her words), she got a room which to conduct her business. It was an offer she found hard to turn down. Working the hotel kept her off the streets, and thus off the radar of the vice squad. That her "office" faced Arlen's apartment, providing him with some free after-dinner entertainment, was just a coincidence. A happy coincidence, in his opinion, and about the luckiest thing to happen to him in... he couldn't remember how long.

His luck hadn't improved all that much since then.

"Had enough, Arlen?"

It was close to noon, according to Arlen's watch. It was impossible to tell otherwise, since casinos like Merlin's didn't have clocks—all the better for them to keep you from realizing how long you'd been gambling, and how quickly you'd lost your money. The other six players had moved on at various points during the morning, but still sitting at the other end of the poker table was a duded-up, thirty-something cowboy who called himself "Texas Slim" McMurtry. There was nothing slim about McMurtry, except maybe for how he liked his women, and if he was from Texas, then Arlen was the king of fuckin' Siam. The half-assed drawl "Slim" kept slipping out of sounded like it had come from watching too many Yosemite Sam cartoons as a kid. The one time he said "varmint" in passing, Arlen had almost laughed in his face.

He wasn't laughing now, though. The pot sitting in the middle of the table held two hundred dollars of his cash, and he was down to his last fifty in chips. He'd tried bluffing, tried raising the stakes in the blind hope Slim would back down and fold, but the cowboy hadn't flinched—probably learned how to do that from watching Clint Eastwood westerns. Or *Maverick* reruns.

Sure, Arlen could have folded before things started getting out of hand. But he'd been doing pretty well in the early rounds—well enough to be the only other survivor of this impromptu low-stakes tournament—and knowing when to fold 'em and walk away, as Kenny Rogers used to sing about, had never been one of his strengths. Besides, up until the last couple of hands, he'd almost convinced himself this was going to be his time to shine.

That right there should have been a clear warning sign it was time to pack it in. Self-delusion was the first step in the downfall of every gambler from Vegas to Monte Carlo. Having fallen into that trap as often as he did, one would think Arlen would have learned his lesson. But then, he'd never been the brightest kid in school.

Arlen pushed the dark wraparound shades he always wore during games to hide his eyes, not to mention his startled reactions to

getting dealt bad hands, back onto the bridge of his nose, and reached down to lift the edges of the five cards in front of him. He needn't have bothered to check them; they were the same suck-ass cards they had been when he first got a good look at them.

Ace of Spades. Ace of Clubs. Eight of Spades. Eight of Clubs. Nine of Diamonds. Pretty much the same hand Wild Bill Hickock had been holding in Deadwood, South Dakota, in 1876, when he got shot in the back of the head by Jack McCall.

The Dead Man's Hand.

Kind of appropriate for the last deal of the night, when you thought about it.

"Arlen?" There was more than a hint of annoyance in Slim's voice now. He was starting to sound less like Yosemite Sam, and more like Foghorn Leghorn.

Arlen looked up and frowned. "Somewhere you gotta be in a hurry, Slim?"

The cowboy in the electric-blue shirt and the scorpion-clasped string tie flashed a gold-capped-tooth grin. "Well, a bathroom break sure would be nice. My bladder's been flexin' its muscles pretty hard the last ten minutes or so."

Arlen shrugged. "So, go take a piss. I'll still be here when you get back."

"Now, that's right kindly of ya, pardner," Slim said with a friendly nod, "but I got me a powerful feelin' this here showdown won't last more'n another minute. An' once I collect my winnings, I can take all the time I want waterin' the roses."

Arlen sighed. Smug little bastard, isn't he? But he was right, and they both knew it; sitting there and staring at his hand like a chump was only delaying the inevitable. Might as well just get it over with. Let the man go relieve the pressure in his bladder before it exploded. He tossed in his remaining chips. "Call."

Slim dramatically laid out his cards on the green felt. Arlen felt a weight settle in his stomach.

It was a steel wheel. Ace of Hearts. Two of Hearts. Three of Hearts. Four of Hearts. Five of Hearts. A five-high straight, all of the same suit. Sure beat the shit out of Wild Bill's hand.

Arlen sat back and pocketed his shades, watching silently as the female dealer slid the winnings over to the last man standing. The chips joined the mountain range that had formed on Slim's side of the table during the morning. The cowboy happily tossed a couple hundred-dollar chips to the woman. A nice tip for her services—but then, he could afford to be generous.

"Thank you, sir," she said.

"No, thank *you*, Brenda," Slim replied. The gold teeth flashed brightly in the low-level lighting. "Y'all have a good day, now."

Jerk, Arlen thought. If you're gonna play at being a cowboy, you oughtta at least get the fuckin' vocabulary right. "Y'all" is short for "*you all*"; a real cowboy wouldn't use it unless he was talkin' to a group, not just one person. Fuckin' Jed Clampett wannabe.

Slim pushed back from the table and stood up. "Figure it's time for me to cash out an' mosey on back to my room."

Arlen nodded. "Why press your luck, right?"

"Well, I'd say the only thing that needs pressin' is these here pants I'm wearin'," Slim replied as he pointed to his rumpled slacks. "My luck's doin' just fine." The sarcastic tone of the question apparently didn't get through to the cowboy's brain—probably because of the shielding created by the ten-gallon Stetson he'd never taken off, even during bathroom breaks.

As a chip-runner came over to help collect the winnings, Slim walked around the table to address his opponent. "It was a right pleasure doin' business with you, Arlen. Y'all really got me worried there a few times. I even thought about cuttin' and runnin' once or twice... until the cards started goin' my way, that is. Guess that's just how the wind blows sometimes, don't it?"

"Guess so," Arlen said tightly.

"I'd consider it an honor to lock horns with you some other time. An' who knows? Mebbe next time you'll be the one comes out on top." He extended his hand.

Cocksucker, Arlen thought, putting on his best false smile. It's always easy to say shit like that when you're not the one gettin' your ass handed to ya.

Not that he'd ever known what *that* felt like. Yeah, right.

Still, he grudgingly shook hands. Arlen Ploog might have been the king of all losers, but he wasn't going to show he was a poor sport.

There wasn't much reason to hang around the casino after that. He wasn't completely busted, but when it came to a choice between spending his last few bucks on lunch or sliding it in quarter form down the throat of one of the slots, his stomach always won out. Almost always.

Arlen walked away from the table, ignoring the dirty look Brenda the poker dealer cut him. What, a two-hundred-dollar tip wasn't enough, he wondered? Greedy bitch. Hopefully, she'd use the money to buy herself a better attitude. Doubtful, though.

The casino floor was quickly starting to fill up as old ladies with ugly, pastel-colored outfits and with even uglier demeanors moved along the ranks of slots they'd each commandeered for the day's activities. And God help the man or woman dumb enough to try sitting down at one of those "reserved" one-armed bandits—they found out soon enough how quick on the draw some of those old ladies could be with their tongues. And they'd only get the one warning before the screaming started, about how the old dear was working that particular machine, how they weren't gonna rob her of a jackpot, the money was gonna come pouring out of the thing any minute now and she'd be damned if anyone was gonna walk away with her hard-earned money.

Lesson number one in Las Vegas: Never fuck with grandma when she's got the fever.

The row upon row of slot machines comprised the outer circle of the gambling maze called Merlin's Tower; the center was where the big games were played—poker, blackjack, roulette, and the like. That's usually where you'd find most of the men, although women's interest in card games had dramatically picked up in the last few years. It probably had a lot to do with all those poker tournament shows that had popped up on cable TV. "A game that takes an hour to learn, and a lifetime to master," the broadcasters always said. Arlen figured he'd get around to the mastering part when he started his second lifetime. God knew he'd wasted away this first one trying

to figure it out. It just seemed a damn shame he didn't believe in reincarnation.

It took him about ten minutes to cross the Tower's cavernous gambling hub and reach the entrance to The Round Table, the casino's dining hall. The trip involved a lot of weaving around the boggle-eyed tourists stunned by all the flashing lights and ringing bells and screeching sirens, the frat boys waiting for night to fall so they could get drunk and get laid (not necessarily in that order), and the occasional kid running loose while mommy and daddy flushed the vacation money down the toilet. And just whose bright idea was it, Arlen wondered, to portray Vegas as a "family friendly" place, anyway? It was a gambling town, for Christ's sake, and it wasn't nicknamed "Sin City" for nothing. There were "all nude" revues both on and off the Strip, a growing number of "gentlemen's clubs" scattered around the city, and on practically every corner there was one of those freebie newspaper dispensers. Only these weren't offering "penny saver" discounts on used washing machines or cars, but listings for the multitude of escort services that existed just outside of Vegas proper. If that wasn't enough, you could always drive a few miles away from the bright lights, into the Nevada Desert communities where prostitution was legal, and blow your wad both financially and sexually.

And *this* was where people wanted to bring their kids?

The Round Table was pretty much like any other "all you can eat" casino feedbag. Colorful banners of red and blue and yellow hung from the thick wooden rafters. "Tapestries"—actually digital scans of real paintings that had been blown up on a computer and printed out on huge canvasses—decorated the fake stone walls. Torches stuck out from metal rings set in the walls, but the flames that flickered in them were just strips of red and yellow tissue paper with small fans beneath them blowing upward. The wooden dining tables were long enough to seat a dozen people or so, with benches running the full length of them. Basically, they were just oversized picnic tables, but most folks were probably so taken in by the "ambience" that they never realized it. Busboys and the occasional waitress, all dressed in

period costumes, moved around the hall, clearing tables and making sure the guests were enjoying their meals.

The centerpiece of The Round Table was its massive buffet area. At times, it seemed as though every dish known to Man could be found there—although the giant mutton leg slowly rotating on a spit above the spread was just a plastic display—and for eight dollars (including tax, paid before you got to the food), a better bargain was hard to find. Only thing was, you needed to get there early enough and hope the stuff you liked hadn't already been gobbled up by the starving masses eager to get back to their games of chance. At this point, however, Arlen was just hungry enough to be willing to settle for chuck steak and those hardened, waxy, little roasted potatoes everybody seemed to avoid. He couldn't afford to be choosy on his budget.

He grabbed one of the oversized, gray-colored plastic trays from the stack near the door, and joined the slow conga line of patrons that led down the winding ramp to the cashier. Eventually, his turn came and he shuffled forward to pay. The cashier knew him on sight; about the only thing he knew about her was her name, and that was because it was printed on her ID badge.

"Hey, Arlen," she said as he stepped up.

He nodded pleasantly. "Hey, Socorro." She was the kind of Latin woman you figured must have been pretty hot-looking in her glory days, but twenty years, forty pounds, and X number of kids later, it had all gone to hell. The ring squeezed onto her third finger showed she was still married, so obviously her husband still found her attractive. In a Roseanne Barr kinda way.

Arlen put his tray down in front of the cash register. Socorro raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "Buffet special?"

He coughed out a sharp, slightly embarrassed laugh. "Well, you know me."

"You and everybody else on this line." She punched the keys on the register, adding up the total. "Eight dollars."

Arlen pulled his wallet from the inner breast pocket of his jacket, and flipped it open. A five dollar bill and a coupon for a free lap dance at the Stallion's Stable strip club were all to be found inside.

Socorro glanced at the contents. "I don't think that's gonna cover it."

"Goddammit," he muttered. Arlen sighed and put the wallet back, then picked up the tray. "Next time, I guess."

"I guess," she agreed. Socorro nodded toward the door. "Maybe you should try the Stable. I hear the strippers serve crab every day." She smiled broadly, and winked.

Arlen grinned sheepishly. "Thanks. I'll keep it in mind."

He turned and made his way up the ramp, trying to act politely as he fought against the current of grumbling diners. With a final shove, he squeezed through the doors, restacked his tray, and began walking back across the casino, this time in the direction of the underground parking garage and his 1984 Monte Carlo.

He shook his head. Just another day in the life of Arlen Ploog, down-on-his-luck gambler: a three-course meal of crow, topped off with a cold slice of financial reality for dessert. He sighed again.

Well, at least he had enough cash to buy a cup of coffee to wash it all down with.

THREE

Shawna Engels hated cats. Not the house variety, after all, a tortoiseshell named Jolly and a stray black tom named A-Rod shared her apartment in Henderson, eight miles outside Vegas, but the big cats. Tigers. Lions. Panthers. Jaguars. The massive SOBs you'd see on the Animal Planet channel, tearing into a caribou or a zebra or whatever the hell it was they ate on those nature shows.

She hadn't always felt that way, but that was before she had to work with them. Strut around a Las Vegas stage in nothing more than a g-string and a pair of high heels, while sharp-clawed predators stalk around you, and you become acutely aware of your vulnerability. And your mortality.

When she left her hometown of Carson City, Nevada, four years ago, Shawna was a fresh-faced nineteen year-old brunette with dreams of being a dancer in one of the big revues on the Strip. Circus, Circus, maybe, or one of those shows where the dancers always looked so glamorous in their feathers and sequins and glittering, colorful costumes.

Six months later, the now-blonde "Mystique" was working an afternoon shift at the oh-so-cleverly named "Shakes" gentlemen's club off Bridger Avenue in the Downtown section of the city, and about the only clothes she wore consisted of stiletto-heeled boots, a bright blue thong, and a matching pair of pasties over her nipples. The addition of the cowboy hat and the little bandit mask had been her idea; after seeing Antonio Banderas in *The Mask of Zorro*, she thought it would add a level of mystery to her act to go with her stage name. As it turned out, the only mystery in which the patrons were interested was how much it would cost them to get more than a private lap dance in the back room. A little "somethin'" she could do for them in exchange for a sizeable tip.

If those customers had been Orlando Bloom or Johnny Depp or Ewan MacGregor, she might have considered it, even though acts of prostitution were illegal within Vegas city limits. Hey, how often does a girl get a chance to bump nasties with Hollywood royalty, right? But since the body types of Shakes's clientele had more in common with Dennis Franz than Dennis Quaid, she politely declined the cash offers, then remarked she wouldn't mind if they bought her another champagne cocktail. No reason to blow them off completely and embarrass them, she figured, and sometimes just having a pretty girl to talk to was enough to make a guy happy. Besides, champagne cocktails cost eight dollars apiece, so she was still bringing extra cash into the club without having to whore herself.

The lack of interest in her dancing talent didn't faze her, though. She still had her dream, and she knew how hard it was for a dancer to find work in this even harder town; you made do with what you could until the opportunity arose to move on to the next level. In the end, though, dreams could come true if you really wanted them to badly enough. At least that's what it said in the movies.

When she heard about the construction of Merlin's Tower, Shawna knew it would only be a matter of time before the call went out for dancers—after all, what was a hotel/casino in this town without some kind of revue? And when that day finally arrived, about six months before the Tower was scheduled to open, Shawna walked out of Shakes and never looked back. She was *that* confident her dream was about to come true, even though more than two hundred other girls stood on line with her the first day, each with dreams of their own.

Magipalooza! was to be the name of the Tower's show, and it was described to them as a spectacle "bigger than Siegfried and Roy, showier than *Showgirls of Magic*, and more explosive than the Mirage's volcano." A lot of hyperbole, to be sure, but everything in Las Vegas was meant to look and sound bigger than life—that's how you got people in the seats. A show that didn't bill itself as having a grand scale equaled only by the Second Coming was a show that wouldn't survive for long, given the fierce competition presented by the other hotels. The trick for producers was in making sure it lived up to its hype.

Being chosen to become one of those minimally attired dancers involved a lot of hard work, but hard work had never scared Shawna. The audition process—during which scores of girls were dropped at the end of each round—seemed endless, but Chip Moench, the company manager, and Dorrie Yungbluth, the dance captain, liked what they saw in her. They thought she'd be perfect for the Tiller line—the high-kick line right up front in the show, its positions assigned only to the most beautiful and talented dancers. The producer, Milos Hewetson, was only interested in two things: if she had a problem going topless, and if she'd lose the blonde dye and go back to her natural hair color—another L'Oreal girl he didn't need. She told him she had no hesitations about meeting either request. It would certainly cut down on her peroxide expenses.

And just like that, she was in. The dream had finally come true.

In Vegas, they call that "beginner's luck". It usually doesn't last for long.

She found that out a couple days later, after the final selections had been made. That was when Milos explained how, as part of the show, the dancers would be sharing the stage with dangerous animals: two lions, two panthers, and three tigers. Shawna didn't like the idea of being that close to four-legged carnivores without a protective fence between her and them, and finally had to admit her fears to Milos.

Oh sure, they were highly trained, and yes, she knew the cats would always be paraded around on leashes held by equally well-trained handlers in costumes. But a lion was a lion, no matter how much you taught it tricks, and in the right frame of mind, a five foot seven, one hundred and twenty pound brunette was just another potential meal in its eyes.

She expected him to cut her from the show right then and there, and put a quick end to her dream. She began to wonder if she could still get her old job back at Shakes. But after a few moments of consideration, Milos simply told her to get over it and get back to work, then walked away.

It was the Mayo Brothers who managed to convince her she was in no danger. Uriel and Olivier were the stars of *Magipalooza!*—it was

their concept, and they would be switching between playing Pallen and Resh from one performance to the next—and the ones primarily responsible for training the big cats. They were Brazilian, both tall and dark-skinned and drop-dead gorgeous, with builds like Olympic track stars. Uriel was the older of the two, and the most laid-back, with an easy, inviting smile and incredible gray-green eyes. Olivier was only two years younger, but his serious demeanor at times made it appear as if he was the older, more responsible one. He, too, was *Playgirl* material, and the soul patch under his bottom lip and the dark blue, almost black, color of his eyes hinted at the type of dangerous nature lying within, that innumerable women the world over no doubt had found unbelievably sexy.

Shawna certainly had, which explained why she'd so eagerly agreed to the brothers' offer to introduce her to the animals. She'd appreciated the attention, much to the consternation of the other girls, but in the end she'd only come away with the names of her potential hunters, and the nagging fear that one day she might become the Blue Plate Special.

She didn't quit, though. Just because she was scared shitless every time one of those beasts roared, it didn't mean she was going to walk away from an opportunity of a lifetime and allow some other girl to take her place. She wasn't an idiot.

And by the time a year had passed, and she had performed with the cats six times a week in over three hundred shows (sick days not really allowed in her profession), Shawna finally learned to relax around them. Not enough to let her guard down when they prowled near her, of course, again, she wasn't an idiot, but enough that her heart would stop leaping into her throat when they ventured a bit too close for her liking.

Because, after all, animals can always sense fear.

The alarm clock buzzed, and Shawna rolled over to shut it off. 11:00am, and the start of another wonderfully beautiful day.

She stretched, arching her back in an unconscious imitation of the very animals that troubled her, then stopped as she felt someone watching her. She glanced at the other side of the bed. Jolly and A-Rod sat on top of the rumpled sheets, quietly eyeing her.

"Good morning," Shawna said lightly.

Jolly yawned. A-Rod stretched and said nothing.

"Anyone up for brunch?" Shawna asked.

Both housecats jumped off the bed and immediately trotted off to the kitchen. Shawna grinned. Who *said* animals didn't understand when you spoke to them? Obviously, that person had never owned a pet. Or been owned by one.

The boys had grown quite upset by the time she stepped out of the shower and slipped into a pink-colored silk robe, if their loud meows were any indication. To Shawna, it was proof positive animals were smarter than people generally thought; she'd offered the cats food, and now they were annoyed their orders hadn't been taken.

"Sorry, guys," she apologized, "but not all of us can get by with just licking ourselves clean."

She ignored the bored-sounding response she got from her customers, and moved across the room to the cabinet over the microwave oven. Like most kitchens in the apartment complex in which she lived, it was not really a place for eating, being no wider than the aisle of an average bodega. On one side, a refrigerator was crammed into a far corner, near the window with its view of Las Vegas in the distance; a small electric stove sat next to it. On the other side were a sink and a Formica counter that ran the length of the room. Above and below the counter, and mounted on the wall beside the stove, were a number of cabinets holding pots, pans, dishes, and foods of both human and feline varieties.

Shawna opened the cabinet and studied the various cans of Fancy Feast and 9-Lives. "So, what'll it be, boys?" she called over her shoulder. "Tuna or beef?" She turned her head to look back at the furry diners. A-Rod tilted his head to one side and mewled softly. Shawna nodded. "One of each. Right."

She took down the food and carried it to the electric can opener that stood beside the toaster at the near end of the counter, then set

about opening the cans. The contents went into two small, plastic bowls that barely made it to the pink and white tiled floor before the cats were tearing into them. A-Rod, being the older, preferred beef; Jolly settled for a fish buffet.

Her customers taken care of, Shawna walked back to the bedroom to get dressed for her trip to the gym. Today's outfit consisted of a pair of white cotton sweatpants, white trainers, and a white T-shirt emblazoned with the words: "Property of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Dept" in dark blue lettering. That had been a gift from her boyfriend, Warren, a homicide detective she'd hooked up with last year. When he'd given it to her three months ago, he'd joked it was to break up the monotony of all those Hello Kitty T-shirts she owned.

Shawna smiled as she ran a hand over the shirt. She and Warren seemed to live at opposite ends of the spectrum: she in the bright lights and opulence of the Strip; he in the shadows and crime of the city's streets. Not exactly the kind of relationship she would have expected to work out, even if you ignored the twenty year age difference, but something had definitely clicked the day they met at Buffalo Bill's Resort in the desert.

She'd driven the forty-five miles to Primm, Nevada, that day because she'd always loved roller coasters, and the Desperado ranked right up there with the best ones she'd ever ridden. It was one of the tallest and fastest in the world, with a few spots during the ride where you actually felt like you were going to float right out of your seat restraints. Shawna loved a good-natured scare every now and then, and the Desperado never disappointed her. Unfortunately, she'd had to make the trip to the amusement park alone, because none of the other girls in *Magipalooza!* were all that fond of the notion of dropping from great heights at ninety mph, or potentially spending the drive back to Vegas hanging out the passenger window and puking out their guts.

Bunch of wussies.

So, there she stood on the line, waiting for her chance to climb aboard the next available car, when she noticed the guy directly ahead of her. Tall, dark, and handsome; regular guy handsome, not Hollywood star handsome, but then real pretty-looking guys tended

to be too high maintenance for her liking. They were too wrapped up in themselves, too inclined to raise hell when they hit the town for the evening. And, of course, it almost never failed that you wound up defending your "claim" on him against other women—either ones looking to elbow you out of the way, or ones he was trying to pick up when he thought you weren't paying attention. The outcome was always pretty much the same: either you got into a shouting match with the other girl, telling the bitch to back off, or the guy was suggesting a threesome in his hotel room.

The man in front of her at the *Desperado*, however, was different. He was alone, for one thing, and had an intense quality to him that no pretty boy she'd ever dated had seemed to possess. Like an aura of strength that seemed to radiate from him. Her gaze went right to the third finger on his left hand.

No wedding band. Well, that had made him look even better.

And then his back stiffened a bit, as though he was suddenly aware that someone was staring at him. Slowly, he turned around to face her.

Love at first sight, and damned if she hadn't known it the moment she saw that rugged jaw and those piercing blue eyes. He'd known it, too. She could tell by the look on his face. It was like an electrical current had run through her body when he smiled at her; she'd felt tingly inside, and the skin on her arms got all goose-pimpled.

"Hey," he'd said.

"Hey," she'd replied.

Of such witty conversation-openings are romances born.

Guys tended to stare at her breasts, but when Warren looked at her, he focused on her face, not her boobs. And while they spoke, the line moving ever closer to the coaster, he'd managed to maintain that eye contact... most of the time. He wasn't blind, after all, and it wasn't like the bright pink "Baby Doll" T-shirt she'd been wearing was designed to hide anything.

They discussed careers. Okay, so he'd stared *real* hard at her breasts when the word "dancer" came up, but she'd quickly explained it didn't mean she was a stripper, well, not anymore, and their mutual love of roller coasters. She'd been impressed that he was a

member of the Coaster Kings, a nationwide organization of roller coaster enthusiasts that made trips around the country solely for the sheer pleasure of sampling new and old rides. He even offered to help get her into the group.

When they finally reached the front of the line, Warren had been the one to suggest sitting together in the first car. A good thing he did, too—she would have knocked him down if he'd tried to hog it all to himself.

Shawna shook her head, grinning at the memory of that awkward first "date." She still sometimes found it hard to believe things had worked out so well between them; none of her prior relationships had lasted past the six-month mark. It must have been fate, she told herself. After all, who'd ever think sharing a seat on a roller coaster could wind up changing two lives, just like that?

She sighed and tucked the T-shirt into her sweatpants, then glanced at the clock. 11:40am.

"Oh, crickets," she muttered. She needed to get a move-on if she was going to get in her workout and a few laps in the fitness center's pool. She tossed her iPod, a bath towel, and a bright-red, one-piece swimsuit in her gym bag, added a bottle of body wash for the shower afterward, then hurried to the kitchen for a bottle of water and a Nutri-Grain cereal bar.

A-Rod and Jolly, she noted, made no attempt to get out of the way as she danced/hopped around them to get her supplies from the cabinets. Having devoured their brunch, they were apparently content to lie on the kitchen floor and soak up a few rays from the light spilling through the window. If they were aware of how annoying it was for Shawna to detour around a couple of furry roadblocks, they made no attempt to show it.

Shawna wove her way back out and grabbed the car keys and cell phone from the living room coffee table on her way to the front door. "Try not to wreck the place while I'm out, guys," she called to the cats. "I'll be back around one."

Jolly waved a paw in her direction, but Shawna couldn't be certain if he was waving goodbye, or motioning for her to get the hell out of his apartment.

It didn't matter, she thought with a smile as she closed the door. It was going to be another beautiful day in Las Vegas, and *nothing* was going to spoil it for her.

FOUR

"Just another beautiful day in Las Vegas," muttered Warren Ackerman. He might have actually meant it if he hadn't been standing in the middle of a crime scene, staring at a bloodstain the size of Rhode Island.

Death is a part of life. Warren must have heard that old cliché spoken a hundred times, if not more, during his time on the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department; it usually came up as part of the eulogies at funerals. But just because he'd heard it so often didn't mean it had lost its impact—not twenty years ago, when he was a rookie cop, and not now as a homicide detective. It was meant to bring some peace of mind to the families of the victims, a way of assuring them that their loved one's passing was just a part of some great cosmic balance: dust we were, and to dust we shall return. To Warren, however, it only meant they'd been cheated of their chance to live a full life.

That especially held true when the victim was ten years old.

Danny Larriva was just like any other kid, according to the neighbors; he played with the others in the playground behind the housing complex, liked watching cartoons, never made any trouble. A happy little boy who told people he wanted to be a wrestler when he grew up, like his heroes on the TV; a little boy now lying bruised and bloody and very dead on the living room floor of his mother's apartment.

Another life lost, Warren thought, and for what? What kind of goddamn "cosmic balance" depended on the death of an innocent child?

He felt the anger building, and fought to push it back down. He closed his eyes and ground his teeth, knowing he needed to focus, needed to emotionally distance himself from what he was seeing, or he'd be no good on this investigation, no good to himself, and no good to the victim.

Slowly, the barrier slid down around his heart: the one that protected him from the shock, the anger, the misery of what he faced.

The mental shield that allowed him to feel nothing until the job was done; until the killer was brought to justice, and his victim could rest easier. Warren had spent years building that barrier, like every cop did. It was the only way to work a case with any level of efficiency. When the murderer was caught, when the case had been cleared; that would be the time for the barrier to lift. That would be the time for mourning.

Warren opened his eyes and looked around. The apartment wasn't all that large—a combination living room/kitchen, two moderately-sized bedrooms, and a small bathroom and had quickly-filled up with crime scene technicians gathering evidence. Still, despite the shabby, low-rent quality of the building in which it was located, the apartment was modestly decorated and surprisingly clean. It had a woman's touch, with lace curtains on the windows and plastic slipcovers on the couch and chairs. And a devoutly religious woman, at that, if the statue of the Virgin Mary on the TV, the crucifix hanging above the front door, and the large votive candle on the kitchen table were any indication. She probably went to church a lot, too.

Warren glanced down at the lifeless body on the floor, and grimaced. All that devotion to God, and *He* still looked the other way while her boy was beaten to death. Would she still be able to believe the Almighty had decided to call him back to Heaven, when the evidence of his brutal end was soaking into those lace curtains and spattered across those plastic slipcovers? Maybe she would. Maybe she'd need to, in order to make some sense out of such a senseless act. Maybe her devotion to God was all she had left now.

There were little framed pictures scattered around the living room tables; photos of a little boy growing up, and his proud mother. No sign of any father, though. They were only memories of a child who would never get any bigger, nor any older. Snapshots of a life ended far too soon.

Danny had been a cute kid, just as the neighbors had told Warren during the preliminary interviews, but there was little remaining of that childhood beauty. His bare arms and chest were a mass of bruises and welts, his face broken and bloodied and barely

recognizable. The dark, bowl-cut hair was matted with thick clots of blood, and the left eye socket had been crushed; the impact crater of a large ring was gouged deep into the purpled skin. It had taken a lot of strength to do all this a lot of strength, and a lot of anger.

"Jesus Christ," a woman muttered softly.

Warren turned toward the door. Isabelle Montoya had become his partner only six months ago. For some reason, she'd actually *requested* a transfer to Homicide from Vice. He figured it was probably because she got tired of dressing up like a hooker for sting operations at least corpses weren't going to be interested in fucking her the moment she walked into a crime scene. As yet, she hadn't gotten around to telling him her reasons for leaving, and he hadn't felt the need to press the issue. He *did* know her superiors had been annoyed at losing her; her sultry looks and keen street instincts were a hard combination to find in the department. But the brass had okayed the transfer anyway, and no one had argued the point. Could have been because of her impressive service record, could have been because she had juice with someone in the department, as Warren had heard rumored. Problem was she was almost too pretty to be working homicide—with that shoulder-length black hair and those high cheekbones and long legs, she could have passed for one of Shawna's showgirl friends.

Too bad she hated amusement park rides. Her husband, Charlie, did too.

Still, despite the department jokes about "Beauty and the Beast" partnering up, he and Isabelle had become a pretty good team, both on and off duty, and had come to enjoy each other's company. He and Shawna had even double-dated a few times with Izzy and Charlie, although setting those up always turned into logistical nightmares with their conflicting work schedules: Shawna was in *Magipalooza!* six days a week, Charlie worked nights as an electrician for Nevada Power, and Warren and Izzy had cases to clear. And yet, through trial and error, they somehow came up with ways to make arrangements, if only to give the Montoyas a much-needed break from their three rambunctious kids. Izzy had even joked on an occasion or two that working homicide was welcome

distraction from the unwelcome arrival of puberty in her house, especially with a daughter who looked like she was going to become the spitting image of her mother.

But now that she'd gotten a good look at the latest victim, was clear from Isabelle's horrified expression that she was beginning to wonder if requesting that transfer from Vice had been a smart move after all.

Warren stepped forward to block her view. "What've you got, Izzy?" he asked.

It took her a moment to focus, but then she shook her head and looked up at him. "Uh..." She jerked a thumb over her shoulder, in the direction of the neighbors who'd come to gawk at the crime circus that had set up its tent for the day. A better show you couldn't find off the Strip, Warren thought darkly. "Couple of the neighbors said they heard yelling about 10:00am. Couldn't make out what was said, but there always seemed to be some yelling going on in here." She glanced at the notepad she held to check over what she'd been jotting down. "I checked with Dispatch. Six calls in the past four months."

Warren frowned. "Domestic disturbance, right?"

Isabelle nodded. "Last one was a week ago Friday."

"And today?"

"Nothing." She shrugged. "Guess everybody just got used to the noise, huh?"

Warren grunted. "Until it stopped. Where's the mother?"

Isabelle nodded back with her head. "A few doors down with a neighbor. Ferguson says she's a wreck." She leaned to the side, to glance around her partner, then crossed herself. "Can't say I blame her."

Warren drew a deep breath, then exhaled sharply. "Let's go see her."

Carolina Larriva was still wearing her housekeeper's uniform: a light blue, short-sleeved dress and matching flat-heeled shoes; an

embroidered patch over the left breast identified her as an employee of Merlin's Tower. She was heavyset, in her forties, wisps of gray sprinkled through her short, dark hairstyle. There were traces of varicose veins in her left leg, no doubt from long hours spent on her feet—Warren's father, Jay, had suffered from the same condition when he was a cop. She was hunched over in one corner of a blue plaid futon, rocking back and forth. The apartment's owner, an African-American woman named Carlie Rumbelow, sat beside her, one arm draped over the mother's shoulders.

Warren noticed that Carolina clutched a set of wooden rosary beads as she softly moaned a prayer; asking God to take care of her son, more than likely. According to Terry Ferguson, the first uniform on the scene, Mrs Larriva had been the one who discovered her son's body. It was her screams that prompted one of the neighbors to call for help. Eventually.

She was long past screaming now, the initial horror replaced by shock and disbelief. She was replaying the scene over and over in her mind; her numbed expression was all Warren needed to see to confirm that suspicion. He also knew she'd be seeing it for a long time to come.

Warren nodded slightly to Ferguson as he squeezed into the small apartment, and walked up to the grieving mother. "Mrs Lavirra," he said softly. Her only response was to keep rocking, sobbing all the while into the balled-up wad of Kleenex she clenched tightly in her hands; the tissues were already soaked through. "Mrs Lavirra," he repeated, a bit louder. When she finally looked up he pointed to his badge, clipped to the breast pocket of his jacket. "Detective Ackerman. I'm sorry for your loss, ma'am."

She nodded. "Thank you," she replied hoarsely.

Warren gestured toward Isabelle, who'd come in just behind him. "This is my partner, Detective Montoya. We'd like to ask you a few questions, if you're up to it."

She nodded again. "Okay."

Warren looked over to Ms Rumbelow, who moved off the couch to make room for him and Isabelle. They took their seats, and Warren reached into his jacket's inner pocket to pull out a notepad and pen.

He paused before speaking, giving Mrs Lavirra time to pull herself together. They'd have to go slow and careful in questioning her, try to avoid upsetting her. Bad enough her boy was dead; grilling her on the particulars of the circumstances leading up to it might push her over the edge.

Carolina dabbed at her eyes with the shredded tissues, then took a deep breath. Her entire body quivered as she slowly released the air through her nostrils. "All right," she said quietly, and turned to face him.

"I understand there were a number of domestic disturbance calls over the past few weeks," Warren began. "Could you tell me what those were about?"

Carolina glanced away, her lips drawing tightly shut. "Those were... they were nothing," she said in heavily accented English.

The sound of flipping pages brought him back to Isabelle. She was going over her notes. "On 15 March, at 10:36pm, Officers Bradstreet and Niles arrived at your apartment in response to a call about a woman being beaten. They found you on the floor with a split lip and a black eye. They questioned the male Latino in the residence at the time; he said you'd had an accident. You refused to press charges."

"Because it was nothing," Carolina insisted. "Nothing."

"On 22 April, at 2:17 am, Officers Ortega and Ang responded to another call; this time, you required transport to Valley Hospital Medical Center." She glanced up, to stare at Carolina. "Two cracked ribs and a broken nose."

"I guess that was nothing too, right?" Warren raised a quizzical eyebrow. "And who was involved in these 'nothing' calls? Your husband?"

She moved her head, more like a quick snap than a shake. "Don't have no husband. He ran off just after Danny was born. I never seen him again."

"The reports list a Roberto Diaz," Isabelle said. "Is he a friend? A boyfriend?"

"Boyfriend," Carolina replied. She paused. "He lose his temper sometime. When he drink too much." She looked Isabelle straight in the eye. "But that don't mean he don't love me."

"I'm sure," Izzy said blandly, although Warren picked up on the sarcastic tone in her voice right away. He cut her a quick glance—*watch it, now*—then turned back to Mrs Lavirra.

"What about Danny?" he asked. "He and Roberto get along?"

Carolina shook her head. "Danny, he never like Roberto. Never respect him. Always talking back. All the time saying how he not Danny's father, so he don't have to listen to him."

"And how did Roberto take that?"

She looked away. "Danny's words... they hurt him a lot."

A little hard to believe, but Warren wasn't about to press the issue. "Hurt him how?"

She frowned. "It not right, a boy so young talking like that to a grown man."

"Did they hurt Roberto enough to make him angry?" Warren asked.

She halted in mid-speech, then looked back to him, her eyes narrowing in suspicion. "What d'you mean?"

"You said Roberto loses his temper when he drinks," Warren replied. "Was he ever drinking when Danny said those things to him?"

"Roberto is a good man!" Carolina snapped. "He work very hard, try to make a good life for us! You think he hate my boy? Hate him enough to *kill* him?"

"I didn't say he hated your son, Mrs Lavirra," Warren said. "I was just asking if—"

"He can't help it if sometime Danny do something stupid," she continued. "Sometime he needs the... how you say? The discipline." She nodded, as though agreeing with herself. "Roberto only try to help him be a better person. To set him straight."

It was as though a switch had been tripped in Warren's brain. The barrier around his heart lowered just a bit, and he felt his lips draw back in a snarl. "Be a better person'?" he asked slowly. "He was a ten year-old kid, for Christ's sake."

Carolina drew away from him and crossed herself, as though to ward off his curse. Before he could utter a few more choice words,

Izzy gently placed a hand on his arm, and he wisely fell silent. Saving him from himself.

"How often did Roberto have to... discipline Danny, Mrs Lavirra?" she asked.

Carolina sighed. "He was always getting into trouble, that boy. Very clumsy, you know? Always running around the apartment, jumping on the chairs. And so loud, too." She shook her head. "Like the people on the TV."

"The wrestlers?" Isabelle asked. "I understand Danny was a big fan of wrestling."

Carolina smiled wistfully and dabbed at her eyes. "He wanted to be a *luchador* when he grow up... but that was never gonna happen."

"What makes you say that?"

"He was never no good at paying attention," Carolina explained. "Like at school; his teachers all the time telling me he wouldn't sit still for nothing. They couldn't teach him nothing." Another forlorn head shake. "How you gonna learn to be a *luchador* someday when you won't try to learn what they teach you at school first?"

"Danny had a learning disability?" Isabelle asked.

Carolina shrugged. "I don't know. The doctors, they say something was wrong with him, but maybe it go away in time. Me and Roberto, we don't make a lot of money, so we can't afford no fancy doctors."

"You mean specialists?"

Carolina nodded. "All I can do is pray to God to make my Danny better."

Like *that* did a helluva lot of good, Warren thought. "And when the prayers didn't work out?" he asked. "That when Roberto would have to 'discipline' him?"

"Sometimes," Carolina replied. "It was for his own good."

"Yeah? To make him a better person'," Warren said, feeling the barrier slide again. "I got that." Izzy's hand tightened around his wrist, but he ignored her. So much for trying not to upset the victim's mother. "And do you think Roberto might've been disciplining Danny this morning, Mrs Lavirra?"

She started to reply, then clamped her mouth shut and turned away. She rolled the balled-up Kleenex around in her hands, strips of

the sodden tissues drifting to the carpeted floor as the rosary beads tore through them.

Was she wrestling with her conscience, trying to come to grips with the very real possibility that her boyfriend had beaten her son to death because he'd been "clumsy" once too often... or was she just stalling for time? Warren was beginning to think he needed to take a firmer approach to the questioning when Carolina finally responded.

"Maybe," she whispered.

It took another ten minutes to prod the information they needed from her: where Roberto Diaz lived, where he worked, where he might have gone after leaving the apartment. For a woman who'd just lost her only child, Carolina was surprisingly resistant in helping them track down a suspect in the boy's murder. It made Warren wonder if a part of Mrs Lavirra wasn't relieved that she didn't have to deal with such a disrespectful, uncontrollable kid anymore; that maybe with Danny gone, she and Roberto could finally have a life together without the unwanted complications. Was it possible? Could any mother put a relationship with an abusive boyfriend, with any man, for that matter, above the wellbeing of her child?

Christ, yes. The news was always covering stories of mothers who'd drowned their kids in the bathtub, mothers who'd suffocated their kids while they slept, mothers who'd slipped their kids rat poison in their oatmeal. The kind of horrid little tales that outraged TV viewers and spiked ratings for weeks... until people eventually lost interest. Then it was on to the next shocking lead story and the next round of outrage. But whether the perpetrators did it because God told them to, or because the man with whom they were involved had mentioned in passing how the kids were cramping his style, one thing was clear: given the right circumstances, the "fairer sex" could be every bit as cruel, every bit as disturbingly heartless, as any man, mothering instinct be damned.

Did Carolina Lavirra fall into that category? It was hard to tell at this point. On the one hand, it was clear that Danny's death had

come as a great shock to her—you couldn't fake the grieving she was going through. But on the other, given her reluctance in providing information on Roberto... well, you just had to wonder what she was thinking.

Or maybe, Warren considered, he'd been on the job too many years, and had grown as cynical as his old man had become during his years on the force. "There are two kinds of people in this world," Pops had told him one day. "Perps and victims." There were no gray areas in law enforcement, only blacks and whites, good guys and bad. A harsh way of looking at things, but then fifteen years as a murder cop tended to darken one's point of view, as Warren had learned first-hand.

That didn't mean, however, that he had to be a complete cynic. So, until he learned something different, he would give Mrs Lavirra the benefit of the doubt. For now, he'd trust Danny meant more to her than hanging onto a boyfriend who'd apparently pulled a quick fade sometime between the time Carolina had left for work and the time she'd returned home to find her son dead. Warren would have a better idea of just how trustworthy she was after he'd convinced a Deputy District Attorney to put a tap on her phone. There was always the chance Carolina might try to contact Roberto and let him know the heat was on.

Warren's mouth twisted in a rough smile. He might not be a complete cynic, but he wasn't a complete idiot, either.

He left the apartment just behind Isabelle. She slipped on the pair of sunglasses she kept in her jacket breast pocket; the morning glare was getting a little too bright.

"So, where do you wanna start?" she asked.

"We'll finish canvassing," he replied. "See if one of the neighbors saw somebody other than Roberto leaving the apartment before the mother got here."

She tilted her head down, and gazed at him from above the rim of her shades. "But you doubt it, right?"

He did, but settled for a non-committal shrug instead of voicing his thoughts. "We're supposed to be impartial, remember? 'Innocent until proven guilty. For all we know, Bobby stepped out for a pack of

cigarettes and left the door unlocked—no signs of forced entry, from what I saw. And when he got back, he saw the body, freaked out, and split. If that's the case, then all we do is talk to him and find out if he knows what might've happened."

"And if he is the one who killed Danny?"

Warren sneered. "Then we nail the fucker to the goddamned wall."

A small flare of light reflecting off metal caught his eyes, and he looked ahead see the team from the Medical Examiner's office carting away a body bag on a stretcher. Danny Lavirra's next stop was a coroner's table, to determine cause of death. That shouldn't take too long, Warren thought, considering the evidence was plainly tattooed all over the kid's body.

"Poor little guy," Isabelle commented. She sighed. "You know what they say: 'Death is a—'"

"Don't," Warren said sharply. He glanced from his partner to the body bag as it was rolled away. "Just... don't." From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of Izzy glaring at him. "Sorry," he mumbled. "It's just... y'know, I just never cared much for that old saying. Seems too... shallow, especially when there's a kid involved. Know what I mean?"

Izzy nodded. "Yeah, you're right. It was just the first thing that popped into my mind."

"Mm-hmm." Warren looked at the growing crowd of spectators. "Better start asking around before the crowd gets bored. You start on the right, I'll take the left; we'll meet in the middle. Get Ferguson and some of the others to help out. I don't want anybody wandering off we haven't talked to first."

"Got it." Izzy looked up at the bright blue sky, and shook her head. "Some morning, huh?" she said with more than a hint of sarcasm. She headed off to begin her interviews.

Warren grunted, and fished around in his jacket for his own pair of sunglasses. "Yeah," he muttered. "The start of just another beautiful day in Las Vegas."

FIVE

"So, what do you wanna do now?" Tom asked.

Allie shrugged. "I don't know." She flashed a smile. "See how much a divorce costs?" He started a to reply, but she held up her hands to stop him. "Kidding. Just kidding."

Tom eyed her suspiciously. "Mm-hmm."

An uneasy silence filled the space between them; she on the bed, he across the room in a chair by the balcony doors. They'd showered and dressed, separately, then ordered room service and had breakfast. They'd eaten in silence, focusing their attention more on watching *The Today Show* than on having to look one another in the eye across the table. But once the food was gone, and Katie and Matt had signed off for the day, there was nothing left for the newlyweds to do but take stock of their situation. That was when each had gone to their respective corners.

The next fifteen minutes had been spent staring at each other, at the walls and ceiling, at the view of the Vegas Strip outside their hotel room. It was followed by a fair amount of throat clearing and embarrassed smiling. A few instances of tugging at their clothes, to pick off imaginary pieces of lint. A lot of sighing. But not a great deal of meaningful discussion.

Just like now.

"You *did* wanna talk about this, right?" Tom asked.

"Yeah, yeah," Allie said quickly. "Sure."

He nodded. "Okay. Just checking."

"I *do* wanna talk about it," she continued. "I really think *we* need to talk about it. This whole thing—it's pretty fucked-up, you know? But..." She let her thought trail off.

"But?" Tom prompted.

She ran her fingers through her hair, mussing it more out of frustration than a need to fluff it up, then let her hands flop back on the bed. "But, I mean, what's there really to talk about, you know? We weren't shit-faced when we got married; we both knew what we were doing." She looked at him pleadingly for assurance. "Right?"

"Well, *one* of us did," he said with a wry smile.

She sneered. "I don't deserve that." She pointed at him. "You could've called it off at any time. You're a big boy, Tom; nobody was forcing you to get married—not at the courthouse, and not at the chapel. If you didn't want to go through with it, you should've just opened your fucking mouth and said so. Don't try making it *my* responsibility alone, goddammit."

Tom groaned and let his chin drop onto his chest, then looked up. "It was a joke, Allie." He smiled, to show there was no harm. "Just kidding, right?"

She folded her arms across her chest and pushed out her lower lip in a deep pout. "Yeah, well, *I* don't think it was funny," she mumbled. Inwardly, she grimaced, annoyed at the sulky tone of her voice. But she couldn't help it, she'd been hurt by the comment, and wanted him to know it. She never *had* been very good at hiding her emotions.

Tom stood up and crossed the room, to sit beside her on the bed. He took her right hand in his left, and gently rubbed his thumb across the tops of her fingers. With his right, he reached out to stroke her cheek.

"You're right, you didn't deserve that," he said. "I'm sorry." He flashed a smile. "Okay, that was strike two. Still got one strike left, don't I?" He playfully tugged at her chin.

"Maybe." Allie smiled. "Your batting average sucks, though."

"So, maybe I'm just in a slump... but I can still knock that hanging curve outta the park. My bat and me—we can work some miracles when the game's on the line." Tom winked, and Allie could only smile. "You know what they always say?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I know. 'All the girls love the sweet stroke'."

Tom grinned. "That's why I'm so—"

"Egotistical," she interjected.

He started, eyes wide with surprise, then chuckled. "I was gonna say 'popular'."

"One's guy's popularity is another girl's egomania," Allie said.

"Is that so?" He leaned in close, the tip of his nose brushing against hers. "You think I'm egotistical?" he asked, his voice a slow, seductive murmur.

"Only as much as every other guy on the planet," she said in the same soft manner, then grinned devilishly. "That's why you're so easy for women to control."

And with that, she rolled out and away from him, to the other side of the bed. She put her feet on the floor, then looked over her shoulder at Tom. The disappointed expression carved into his features was priceless.

"Hey, stud," she said, "in case you forgot, we came to Vegas to gamble, not spend every waking moment screwing."

"Ugh." He shuddered melodramatically. "You make it sound so dirty when you talk about love that way with that pottymouth."

She bent down to slip on her sneakers. "Honey, 'love' ain't nothing but sex misspelled," she quipped, and began tying the laces.

"Where'd you pick that up from?" Tom asked.

She shrugged. "Don't remember. Must've read it in a book somewhere. I was thinking about turning it into a T-shirt—maybe have it printed down in the hotel gift shop."

"Well, you certainly got enough space on that chest of yours to hang a billboard that long," Tom commented.

She sat up and turned to face him. The wide, sardonic grin he wore brought a smile to her own face. "Smartass," she said.

"That's 'egotistical smartass' to you," he corrected. "If you're gonna label me, you might as well be consistent about it."

"I'll make a note of that," Allie replied, "in case I need to add more adjectives to the list later on."

"Whatever," he said pleasantly. He jammed his hands into the pockets of his khaki, knee-length walk shorts. "So, to repeat the question, what do you wanna do now?" He nodded his head in the direction of the small breakfast table. "Hotel brochure says they've got an observation deck and some fish restaurant up on the roof. You wanna check that out?"

Allie stood up, and smoothed out the wrinkles in her T-shirt, tucking the bright pink garment back under the waistband of her

white shorts. "Maybe later. We just ate a little while ago, remember?"

"Okay. Well, what do other people do on their..." Tom's voice trailed off, and Allie glanced up. He'd been about to say *honeymoon*; the flush of embarrassment on his face was evidence of that. He shrugged. "You know."

"Yeah," she said quietly. She matched his shrug. "My parents went to Niagara Falls for their... you know. But you never really *want* to hear what they did, do you? Just the *idea* of your folks gettin'—"

"Jiggy with it?" Tom offered.

Allie stared at him for a moment, then frowned. "You are, like, the most tragically white guy on the planet, you know that? And about five years outta touch in trying to sound hip."

Tom smiled, and nodded toward the bed. "Yeah, well, it's not like we talk a lot about pop culture when we're doin' the wild thing in the sack."

"The wild thing." Allie's frown deepened. "Could you stop talking like that—like, immediately? You're starting to sound like my mom when she used to tell me what she was like when she was a teenager."

Tom's eyebrows shot up. "Your mom used to tear it up back in her day?"

Yeah, Allie thought, that would sure be a surprise to him, given how straitlaced and Middle America housewifey Jacqueline Dubay-Goodwin appeared. The years might have added pounds to her body and lines to her face, and her hair might be more gray now than brown, but Jackie was still attractive in her own way; certainly still attractive to her husband, who had been fairly handsome in his day. And it was easy to see, when mother and daughter were together, from whom Allie had inherited her good looks. Inheriting her mom's skills as a home economist, however, was another matter. Jackie was the type who kept an immaculate home, balanced the checkbook, still cooked dinner every night, participated in community bake sales, even gave piano lessons in the basement rec room three times a week.

A regular June Cleaver, her mother... except, apparently, when the bedroom door was closed.

Allie grimaced. Now, *there* was an image she didn't need spinning around in her head. She looked at Tom, who was grinning like an idiot.

"So, now I know where *you* get that crazy nature from," he said. He exhaled dramatically. "That's a relief. I think I would've had a stroke if you'd told me you got your freak-o-meter from your *dad*."

"Hey," Allie said sharply, "it's not like I *wanted* to hear about her sexual adventures. It's just that, back when I was having those..." She paused before continuing. She didn't like dredging up certain painful memories—especially these particular ones. "...problems, she used to sit down with me and tell me stories about her college days. Trying to bond with me, I guess, to let me know I wasn't a complete alien to my parents. That she could kinda empathize with what I was going through."

Tom nodded in understanding. "I can see that. Makes sense, considering what you were... going through back then." He slyly looked at her. "So, uh... just how wild *did* your mom get?"

"None of your fuckin' business," Allie countered with a smile. "You perv."

He held up his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay. But, y'know, I *had* to ask." She stared at him, one eyebrow raised to make it clear she thought he was full of shit. "Okay," he finally conceded, "I didn't *have* to ask. I was just curious, is all."

She crossed her arms across her chest. "Why?" she asked in mock seriousness. "Thinking about hitting on my mom when we get back?"

"Umm... eww," Tom replied. "Thanks for the mental wallpaper, Allie." He shuddered like a drama queen, as though creeped out by her question. "No, I just wanted to know if your mom came anywhere close to what you—"

"Not even," Allie replied. "Nobody I know comes anywhere close to what I used to do." She paused. "Not that, y'know, looking back, it's something to really be proud of."

Tom nodded. "Yeah, I guess so." The nod continued as he drifted into silence. Now it was *his* turn to hesitate. Finally, he looked at her. "So... when do you want to talk about—"

"Maybe later," she said, turning away. To her, it sounded like *maybelater*, as though she couldn't get the words out fast enough to move the conversation along. Anything to keep their minds off other matters.

"Uh... okay," Tom said slowly. "But, I mean, *you're* the one who wanted to—"

"I know, I know." Allie walked over to the dresser across from the bed to grab her fanny pack. "But not right now, okay? I just want to get out of the room for awhile." She flashed a false smile at his reflection in the mirror. "After all, you don't travel almost halfway across the country and come to Vegas just to sit in your room all day, right?"

He didn't respond, just stood there with his hands in his pockets. Looking disappointed in her. Then he shrugged.

"Well, we could hit the casino," he offered.

"Yeah. Yeah, the casino sounds good," she replied, nodding like her head was attached to a spring. "I mean, trying my hand at poker was the whole point of coming here. Not the... other thing."

Still avoiding the issue, I see, said a tiny voice in the back of her mind.

Christ Almighty, she thought. What happened to all the talking we were supposed to be doing? I can't even get myself to say a couple of words like *marriage* or *honeymoon!* Her lips came together in a tight line. Thought you gave up all that procrastinating shit after college, Allie.

"All right," Tom said, "we better get going before the maid shows up to clean the room. Don't wanna get in her way, right?" He grabbed his wallet, cell phone and watch from the dresser. The wallet went into his back pocket, the watch onto his left wrist, and the phone into a plastic holster clipped to his belt.

Allie noticed he was still wearing the wedding band... like he'd already gotten used to it. She looked at the matching ring on her own finger, and rubbed it between the thumb and forefinger of her right hand. It felt strangely heavy, and all too tight.

Like a noose around my neck, she thought glumly.

Jackie Dubay might have been a bit rambunctious in her day, but in all honesty, she couldn't hold a candle to her daughter. Not that there had ever been any sort of contest between them; until Allie's "problems" had become insurmountable, she hadn't even known about her mother's partying life. That was probably a good thing, as Allie had often later reflected; given her nature, she would have gone out of her way to top everything Jackie had done.

Come to think of it, she *had* topped everything Jackie had done, and gone well past it. It wasn't anything she really liked to reminisce about, but there it was: a truly fucked up segment of her life that was lodged in the back of her thoughts like a sliver of wood stuck in her finger—not too far from the surface, impossible to pull out, always causing her nagging pain. It lurked in her nightmares and haunted her daydreams, and although the shrinks she'd been to over the years assured her that the memories would fade in time, and the emotional and psychological scars would heal, Allie knew better.

The kinda shit she'd gone through, you never forget it—not now, not ever. No matter how much time might pass.

It started back in high school, as these things sometimes do. Once puberty took hold of her, and transformed the chubby, pigtailed child into a curvy, dark-haired teenager, Bob and Jackie Goodwin realized they had missed their chance to lock up their only daughter in an ivory tower before the male population picked up the overpowering scent of her pheromones. It took Allie a little while to realize the attention she was getting from the male students wasn't the usual kidding around. She'd grown up with a lot of the guys, after all, and had always been considered more "one of the gang" than some "stinky" girl, probably because she'd played as rough as they did when it had come to the schoolyard. But once it became clear that some of them now wanted to be more than just friends, and that a few had actually grown into pretty hot-looking studs, a circuit apparently switched on in her head, and she put away her Ken dolls to start playing with boy toys of an entirely different sort. The

hormonal floodgates had opened, and Allie allowed herself to be carried away with the flow.

That turned out to be the biggest mistake of her young life.

The last two years at Towers' Peak High School became one long party, filled with weekends and summer vacations that were equal parts booze and drugs, reckless behavior and unprotected premarital sex. All the things that would have guaranteed her suffering an extremely messy death in any low-budget horror movie involving a psychopath and a large kitchen knife. She found that sort of amusing.

Then she developed an attitude. She became argumentative. Stayed out till all hours of the night, and refused to tell anyone where she'd been, or with whom. Had a number of encounters with the police, usually involving public drinking. Her parents tried to warn her about the dangers she was facing; her teachers and school counselors tried to get through to her; even her best friend, Talia Kraft, told her to slow down before something bad happened. Allie, however, was having too good a time enjoying her newfound popularity to realize just how fucked-up she was making her life.

And so it continued as she graduated high school and moved on to college... although how she'd managed to get that far, without some tragedy befalling her, was anyone's guess. Surprisingly, much to the Goodwins' confused delight, her grades had never fallen. Allie might have been the ultimate party girl, but she had no intention of going through life a drunken idiot, which made more than a few folks wonder if her wild behavior was just an act.

It wasn't, though. And while the events of *that night* didn't quite make for a wake-up call, they certainly got her attention.

"You okay?" Tom asked softly.

Allie started. "Hmm?" She blinked and realized they were standing in the rear of the elevator, on their way down to the Tower's lobby; she didn't even remember getting on.

Standing just ahead of them, facing the door, were a man and woman. Although Allie couldn't see their faces, she surmised from

the wrinkled flesh of their arms and the gray coloration of their hair that they were well past sixty, and possibly from Florida, maybe from southern California, if their deep tans were any indication. They were together, no doubt, and had that touristy look to them: the summer prints on their shirts—large enough to cover their girth like gift paper wrapped around a couple of beach balls—and the dark pants were a dead give away. Allie particularly liked the old man's combination of black socks with brown loafers in a desert location. It reminded her of Grandpa Joey, on her dad's side of the family. A classic look among senior citizens that never goes out of style, she thought with a wry smile.

Tom leaned in closer and muttered, "You spaced out there for a little bit. Got a lot on your mind?"

"Something like that," Allie replied uneasily. Thanks for reminding me, Tom.

She looked down and caught sight of the wedding bands the couple wore; the woman's was paired with the large diamond engagement ring she still wore, just below the gold band. Allie hesitantly touched her own ring, and for a moment she had the unsettling feeling that the elderly couple she was standing behind were really reversed reflections of her and Tom, years from now. A vision of the future, as it were.

The Western omelet she'd had for breakfast suddenly felt like a stone settling in her stomach; her throat burned with the taste of red peppers, and bile. She closed her eyes and forced it back down, but the scorched sensation in her esophagus remained.

"Allie?" She recognized the concerned tone in Tom's voice.

Thankfully, the stopping bell sounded in the car before she could answer, and the elevator slowed. They'd arrived at the lobby.

She opened her eyes to find Tom and the seniors staring at her, and was grateful to discover that the puffy, sun-baked features of the older woman proved she couldn't possibly be Allie's twin from the future—Allie wouldn't be caught dead wearing that much rouge on her worst day.

"You all right, darling?" the woman asked as the elevator door opened. The car was immediately filled with a deafening array of

rings, buzzes, whirrs, and screeches: the sounds of a legion of slot machines all conversing at once, their mechanical babble occasionally interrupted by all-too-human cheers and curses.

"Yes, I'm fine," Allie said, smiling weakly. "It's just a little... stuffy in here." That was an understatement; in truth, she was starting to feel absolutely claustrophobic with Tom and these people pressing close in on her.

The man impatiently gestured for his wife to leave the car. "Step out, Ethel," he ordered. "Let the girl get some air. You'd rather stand around and watch her pass out from lack of oxygen?"

"There's no need for you to take that tone with me, Fred Newton," the woman replied stiffly. Nevertheless, she walked out of the car and moved to one side, her husband at her heels.

Tom put his left arm around Allie's waist, then took hold of her right arm at the elbow to guide her out of the elevator.

"This really isn't necessary, Tom," she insisted as they stepped into the lobby. "I'll be fine in a minute."

"That's what you used to say when we went out drinking," Tom replied. He steered her toward the lounge chairs a short distance from the front desk. "And the second I let go, you were falling flat on your face."

"That's because I was totally shit-faced," she explained. "You see me hitting the mini-bar in the room this morning?"

"No, but we sure were last night," Tom answered. "You forget that already?"

Allie grimaced. "No, but I'd like to." Reaching one of the lounge chairs, she took a seat and rested her head back. It wasn't the drinking that had sent her reeling, that was for damn sure. The argument they had had burned away all traces of the alcoholic haze she might've been feeling when she first woke up.

Well... that, and the shock of realizing she was now Mrs Almarine Goodwin-Gaines, of course.

"You sure you're all right, honey?" Ethel bleated into her ears, causing Allie to jerk back to reality. The old woman reached into her oversized purse, more like a brightly colored suitcase than handbag, and rummaged around inside it for a few seconds. Finally, she pulled

out her hand and shoved a big, white plastic bottle toward Allie's face. "Maybe you need a Tums?"

Allie held up her hands and forced a smile. "No, that's okay," she said. "I'm fine. Really."

"They're tropical flavors," Ethel replied in a light, singsong fashion, like a mother trying to convince her kid to take their medicine. She rattled the bottle slightly as an enticement; inside, chalky tablets the shape of tiny hockey pucks banged and clanked together like they were made of stone. Yeah, that sounded really inviting...

Allie shook her head. "Thanks. No."

"Jesus Christ, Ethel. Leave the girl alone," Fred said sharply. "She already told you she was okay." He turned to Allie and smiled. She noticed how his gaze dipped down for a second. Just long enough to take a quick peek at her breasts, before he made eye contact. "Me and Ethel, we've got five kids and twelve grandkids. Old habits die hard, you know? Sometimes she can't help mothering folks."

Smothering folks is more like it, Allie thought, but she nodded in understanding anyway. "I appreciate the offer, though," she said to Ethel. "It was very kind of you."

The old woman smiled and put away the bottle. "Maybe you should get some ginger ale, just in case you feel queasy again. I'm sure they must sell it in one of the gift shops."

"I will," Allie promised.

Ethel nodded and turned to Tom. "You be sure and take care of your missus," she cautioned, wagging a thick index finger at him. "I know how wild this town can be. Fred and me have been coming here for over thirty years. We know the foolishness young people can get into with all the temptations around." She gestured toward her husband. "The two of us might fight like cats and dogs, but that don't mean we don't care about each other. You want your marriage to work, you've gotta look out for each other."

"Marriage?" Tom asked dully.

She took his left hand, held it up, and pointed to the wedding band. "You think I didn't notice this when we got on the elevator? I saw you fiddling with it all the way down in your reflection."

Tom actually blushed and did his best to avoid Allie's gaze. So, he was feeling a little of the weight himself.

Ethel released his hand and turned back to Allie.

"Just got hitched, huh? Now I know why you've got an upset stomach. Newlywed jitters." She winked. "I went through the same thing when Fred and me tied the knot." She glanced at her husband. "Didn't I, Fred?"

He shrugged. "You asking me to remember something that happened thirty-odd years ago?"

"You're right. I should've known better than to ask," she replied in a chiding tone. "After all, it was only our *wedding night*." She looked at Allie and shook her head in a despondent manner. "I shouldn't be so surprised. He was half in the bag most of our honeymoon, anyway."

"Only because I was trying to drink the very thought of you into oblivion, you old harpy," Fred commented, then turned to Tom. "Didn't do a very good job of it, did I?"

For once, Tom wisely kept his mouth shut. He just grinned awkwardly and shrugged.

"So, like I was saying," Ethel continued, "you mind your wife. You can get distracted with all the pretty girls in this town, but it's the one you're married to you need to give attention to. Don't ruin what you just started because somebody tried to lead you down the wrong path."

"Uh... sure," Tom said.

Ethel then cast her eyes on Allie. "The same goes for you, young lady. You think you've got yourself a good man to watch out for you, you hold onto him tight and ignore any of the johnny-come-latelies who come knocking at your door." She gave a sly grin. "Even if some of them *do* have bodies like Adonis."

"Yes, ma'am," Allie replied with a smile.

Fred grunted loudly. "You about done preachin' to the congregation, minister?" he asked in a sarcastic tone. "The day's not getting any younger."

"And neither are you," Ethel shot back. "Don't know why you're in such a hurry to get to gambling. You've never won anything in your

life."

"Of course I never win!" Fred shouted. "Not when I gotta hear your harpin' all day long, puttin' the jinx on me!"

"So, I'm a jinx now, am I?" Ethel asked in a stern tone. She went to cross her meaty arms across her broad chest, but had to settle for only locking her wrists in her hands.

Fred rolled his eyes. "Oh, here we go..." He threw up his hands and started walking away.

"Now, just you wait a minute, Fred Newton..." Ethel said as she stormed after him.

Allie looked to Tom, and shrugged. Apparently, they'd already been forgotten. She turned back to see what was happening. As the older couple moved farther away, anything Ethel was saying was quickly drowned out by the louder casino noises. It was probably something heavy-duty, Allie imagined, watching Fred clamp his hands over his ears. Or maybe he was just tired of hearing the same old arguments. His wife had thirty-plus years of material to draw on, after all, and by now he'd no doubt heard it all.

"Yeah, it must be love, all right," Allie sighed and glanced at Tom. "Still wanna give it a chance?"

"What, this marriage thing? Sure." He gestured in the direction of the Newtons. "You think that was bad, you haven't seen Mia and Will goin' at it."

"Your aunt and uncle?"

He nodded. "Like World War fuckin' Three every Thanksgiving. But, y'know what? Say something outta line to one of them, and the other will be down your throat in a heartbeat, tellin' you to fuck off."

Allie raised an eyebrow. "And that, to you, means they love each other?"

"Well, they've been together, what, twelve or thirteen years?" Tom replied. "So, in some crazy way... yeah, I guess they do. Like what's-her-name?"

"Ethel," Allie interjected. He'd always been terrible at remembering names, starting right from the moment the person he'd been talking to walked away. He was great at remembering faces, though.

Tom nodded. "Yeah, like Ethel was saying about her and her husband. They might fight a lot, but it doesn't mean they hate being together."

Allie chuckled. "That's, like, the most fucked-up logic I've ever heard, but I wasn't going to get into it with her. I mean, thirty years of arguing? Why would anyone be willing to put up with that much shit for that long?"

"You ever ask your parents?" he replied.

Her good mood quickly dissolved. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Now it was Tom's eyebrow that did a slow upward crawl. "What, you gonna tell me you never heard your parents fight?"

"No, but..." She paused, suddenly realizing his question wasn't meant to be a challenge. The heat of her gaze cooled considerably. "Oh, I get it." She nodded in agreement. "Yeah, yeah, I see what you mean. Sure, mom and dad have had their share of arguments; usually about money, too."

"And you ever get the impression they can't stand each other?"

"Never," she admitted. She smiled. "Guess that's all a part of being married, huh?"

Married. There, she realized—at last she'd finally come right out and said it. And it hadn't been all that hard to do. Maybe the shock of this morning was beginning to wear off. Or maybe she was starting to get comfortable with the idea.

Tom took a seat on the arm of the chair and took her hands in his. "Look, Allie, maybe what we did yesterday wasn't the smartest thing we ever did together, but I'd like to give it a shot. Test out this husband and wife thing for the next few days, just until it's time to head back home." He broke eye contact with her, and focused his attention on their hands. "And, y'know, if it doesn't feel like it's working out," he said softly, "we'll get one of those quickie divorces before we check out. And when we get back, you go your way, I'll go mine, and nobody will ever have to know what happened."

"What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas', huh?" she asked.

Tom looked up and smiled. "Hey, that's what they say in all the advertising. No reason not to live up to it, right?"

It was supposed to be a joke, but she didn't feel much like laughing. Just the opposite, in fact: she suddenly felt ashamed, and could see that Tom felt the same way. It would mean they'd have to face that what they'd done here had been a terrible, terrible mistake —one that would become a dirty little secret they could never openly discuss once they arrived back in Illinois. An awkward, five-day gap in their lives that could very well put an end to their friendship. There was no doubt of that in Allie's mind; once the divorce was settled, they'd never again be comfortable around one another. There'd be no other option than to drift apart and pretend it never happened.

Was it worth losing Tom as a friend, she wondered, just to put this behind her? After all they'd been through together over the years? All right, so they'd gone and done something stupid; it sure as hell wasn't the first time, and maybe it wouldn't be the last. Probably wouldn't be the last. It was her idea, after all, and hadn't she agreed to go through with the ceremony when she was stone cold sober? So, didn't that mean some part of her had wanted him to be more than a friend? The same part that really *wanted* her to be his wife, to share the rest of their days together?

Would it hurt just to see what might happen if they gave it a try?

"Well," Allie said slowly. "We can worry later about what we'll do before we get on the plane. Let's just see what happens in the meantime.

Tom's eyes widened. "You serious?"

Allie smiled, feeling her cheeks suddenly heat up. God, was she blushing? "You know me, Tommy," she said, trying to sound nonchalant, "I'm always up for trying different things. And if this doesn't count as 'different', I don't know what does." She shrugged. "Till death do us part, right? Or until we can't stand being around other, I guess." She grinned slyly. "Although, if you run into those pretty girls Ethel was talking about and let your dick do the thinking for you, it'll be one and not the other—you get me?"

"Absolutely," Tom replied. He leaned down, and Allie wrapped her arms around his neck to pull him close. She inhaled deeply, drawing the scent of him in, finding comfort in his embrace.

She looked at the ring on her finger, and rubbed it between the thumb and forefinger of her right hand. It felt strangely light, and not as restricting as before.

"You think you've got yourself a good man to watch out for you, you hold onto him tight," Ethel had told her.

I'm sure gonna try, Allie thought with an unexpected thrill, and she angled Tom's head slightly so she could kiss her husband.

SIX

"Now, that felt real good," Warren said with a wide grin. "Best thing that's happened to me today so far."

Shawna smiled and leaned forward to give him another quick kiss on the lips. "Always glad to help out, officer."

"Detective," he corrected. "You telling me you never picked up any of the police terminology from watching all those episodes of *Law & Order*? Christ, they must run that show nine hundred times a day."

"Who pays attention to the dialogue?" she asked playfully. "I was all about Jerry Orbach, God rest his soul. That character he played..."

"Lenny Briscoe," he replied.

"Yeah. Now *there* was a real man: tough and sexy." Shawna sighed and smiled wistfully. "I think that's what attracted me to you."

"Oh?" Warren smirked and sat up a little straighter. "'Cause I'm so tough and sexy?"

She shook her head. "No. 'Cause of your graying hair."

The smile drained off like water swirling down a toilet. "Oh," he muttered, his spine slowly folding back to its normal, slightly hunched configuration. "So, you've got the hots for me because I remind you of a TV character in his sixties. Terrific."

Shawna laughed, then put a hand to her mouth to cover her lips when she realized the people near them had turned around to stare at her. "Sorry," she said, eyes twinkling with mirth.

They were sitting in a booth at The Riverboat, a small diner that was neither boat-shaped nor anywhere near a river, Boston Avenue being quite a few miles away from the waters of Lake Mead. But what it lacked in architecture it more than made up for in nautical décor. There were painted murals of riverboats trawling along the Mississippi on the walls, and the ceiling and floorboards were trimmed with white rope-like molding that, at intervals, formed what Warren assumed were meant to be various types of sailor's knots. The salt and pepper shakers on the table in front of them were shaped like stacks of gambling chips, the napkin dispenser was a plastic re-creation of a poker hand: aces and eights. Apparently, the

manufacturer, and the Riverboat's owner, were unaware of the bad luck associated with the Dead Man's Hand.

And yet Warren and Shawna always sat in this booth—the one with the unlucky napkin dispenser and the placemats with the laminated pictures of actor James Garner as TV Western gambler Bret Maverick on them—whenever they came here to eat. Partly because they preferred to talk in private rather than at the counter, mostly because it was at the back of the diner, facing the front door. For Warren, it was a habit borne of teenage years poring through the works of Mickey Spillane, Raymond Chandler and Jim Thompson. Lessons learned? Never sit with your back to a door, so no one can sneak up on you. Always take the best vantage point in a public setting so you can watch everything that goes on around you. And never order the Catch of the Day.

All right, so that last one didn't come from any potboiler crime novel, but from real life. Warren had learned it all by himself two months ago in this very eatery. Turned out it wasn't carp they served, but *crap*; undercooked crap that doubled him over so much he spent the night on the toilet with a severe case of the squats. If The Riverboat wasn't within easy walking distance for Shawna from Merlin's Tower, he'd probably have never set foot in the place again, and then called in a health inspector to shut it down for good measure. But Shawna really liked the owners, and the diner was the sort of location favored by locals instead of the tourist trade, thus significantly lowering the number of loud Hawaiian-print shirts he had to see during the course of a day, so he took what he learned from his intestinal escapade and used it as a constant reminder to avoid the seafood on future visits. The chili wasn't bad, though.

"So, how's your day been so far?" he asked Shawna. From the corner of his eye, he saw their waitress, an African-American girl probably no older than Shawna, dark hair tied back in a ponytail, approaching with their orders.

Shawna picked up a fork as the waitress placed a small Caesar salad on the table. "The usual. Dorrie's being an asshole at rehearsal."

"Dorrie," he interrupted, sitting back to make room for the waitress as she moved around to his side. "She's one of the dancers, right?" A steaming bowl of chili *thunked* down on his placemat, obscuring James Garner's rugged features. He looked up at the girl. "Thanks..." he glanced at her nametag "...Jasmine."

She smiled pleasantly. "Let me know if y'all need anything else," she said, then walked off to attend to her other tables.

"Dorrie's the dance captain," Shawna corrected him.

"Oh, right, right," he said, nodding his head. The one he always thought of as the anorexic drag queen with the plastic surgery obsession. How old was the woman—late fifties? Early sixties? It was hard to tell, what with her face stretched back so much to get out the wrinkles, she wound up looking like some demented cosmetic surgeon's experiment. He figured there must be some huge knot of flesh tied back under her pageboy hairstyle (an obvious, shoe polish—black wig worn, no doubt, to hide her thinning hair), and one of these days that thing was going to come undone and start unraveling. And God help the person unfortunate enough to witness it; they'd probably go off their fuckin' nut, as his old man would have put it, with all that loose skin flopping around Dorrie's head. Of course, he'd never voiced that opinion to Shawna; exactly why he hadn't, he'd never been sure of. It wasn't as if the two women ever seemed to really get along. Maybe because she'd think it was being disrespectful—which, to be honest, it would be.

Izzy thought it was pretty funny, however. But then, Izzy was his partner; Shawna was his girl. Different worlds, different points of view, and with Shawna he always tried to make sure those worlds never collided. Why bother her with all the shit he had to contend with the shootings, the stabbings, the deaths of innocent kids? She lived in a world of glamor and glitz, not murder and... well, outright evil, so who was he to go around tarnishing her fantasies? Let her enjoy life, he'd decided, while he wallowed around in the shit and the stink; it was better for both of them.

But it was getting harder to do these days, to keep her and the job at opposite ends of the spectrum, he had to admit. The pressures of his caseload were starting to get to him, and there didn't seem to be

any indication they'd be easing off anytime soon. Not with a ten year-old boy lying on a slab in the morgue, his spirit crying out for justice.

"So, as I was saying," Shawna continued, "Dorrie was being her typical asshole self, getting all nitpicky with us about the number in the third act—the one where the dancers are supposed to represent all the souls Morgana's stolen over the centuries."

"That's the one where they got the guys in the harnesses, flying around the stage, right?" Warren asked. He grabbed the pepper shaker and sprinkled a fair amount of the condiment into the chili, then picked up the cellophane-wrapped crackers that came with the meal. He crushed the saltines in their packaging, then ripped it open and dumped the crumbs into the mix.

"Yeah, that's the one," Shawna replied. She stabbed at the lettuce in obvious frustration, then picked up the fork and waved it around, sending bits of shaved Parmesan cheese flying across the table. One piece bounced off the tip of Warren's nose and tumbled into the chili, where it quickly melted. "It's not like we haven't done the routines the same way for the past hundred-plus shows. You'd think it was obvious to that nasty old bitch we know what the hell we're doing by now."

Warren picked up a spoon and began stirring his meal. "You got scared around the cats again, didn't you?" he asked without looking up. When he got no response, he glanced across the booth. Shawna shifted uncomfortably in her seat and looked away.

"Yeah," she finally admitted.

"Nothing to be ashamed of," he assured her, for what must have been the two hundredth time; not that he didn't mean it, every time he said it. "Those fuckin' things are huge. *I'd* think twice about getting anywhere near them."

"I guess." She sighed, and let the fork drop onto the plate. "It's just..."

"I know," he said consolingly, and reached over to hold her hand. He gave it a friendly tug and smiled. "Guess you can never really get used to a bunch of man eaters prowling around, maybe wondering what you taste like."

Shawna shivered noticeably, and Warren slid over to wrap an arm around her shoulders. "Shit. I'm sorry about that, honey," he said. "Just said the first thing that popped into my head; didn't mean to put the idea in yours, too."

"Yeah, well," she replied with a trace of sullen playfulness, "now I'll never be able to get it out." She paused. "Not that it wasn't there to begin with."

He pulled her closer and whispered, "Well, maybe I can do something to take your mind off it tonight, after the show."

She giggled softly. "I'm gonna hold you to that, you know."

"You can hold that, and anything else you'd like, baby," he said in his sexiest voice. Like a typical white guy's impersonation of Barry White: low and deep, only without the soul. He lightly kissed her earlobe. "Besides, I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it."

He reached up and took her chin between his thumb and forefinger and turned her lips toward his, fully intending to prove just how much he meant it—when his cell phone chimed.

"Goddammit." Warren muttered. He sat back and fished around in his jacket pockets for the phone. "Sorry, honey."

Shawna raised an inquisitive eyebrow as the musical tone continued sounding. "Isn't that the music they play for Darth Vader in the movies?"

"Uh-huh," he said. It wasn't in his jacket, so that left his trousers. He leaned toward the left to check the right pocket.

"Got tired of the theme from *Magnum, PI*?" Shawna asked.

"Yeah," Warren replied, now feeling a mite embarrassed as some of the patrons turned around, clearly waiting for him to answer the ring so it would stop annoying them. He finally located the phone in his left pants pocket, and flipped open the clamshell-like device. "Ackerman." He paused to listen. "Okay, be right out." He shut the phone and dropped it in his right jacket pocket, then looked to Shawna. "Sorry, baby. I gotta go."

"Duty calls, huh?" She looked disappointed.

"When doesn't it?" Warren said wryly. He started to slide out of the booth. "Izzy's waiting outside in the car."

"Working on a big case?"

Warren halted. He was hoping she wouldn't ask; normally, she didn't. Considering what he and Izzy were investigating, he knew she'd never be able to focus on her routines if he told her. And with 600-pound meat-eaters almost nipping at her heels, the last thing she needed to be thinking about was some poor dead kid.

"Big case?" He shrugged. "Nah. Nothing you haven't heard about before. Just running down a few new leads on an old one. I'll tell you about it later." He exited from the booth, then stepped over to Shawna's side to give her a kiss. "Tell that panther to back the fuck off next time he gets too close, okay?" he playfully muttered. "Remind him your boyfriend's a cop. I *know* people in Animal Control. They'll fix his *National Geographic Explorer* ass good if he steps outta line."

She laughed softly. God, he loved that windchimes-in-a-gentle-breeze sound. "Such a tough guy," she commented with a smile. "Bet you wouldn't say that if he were standing right next to you."

"Sure I would, sweetheart. *I'm* the one with the gun." He winked, then gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "I'll call you later." He turned to leave.

"Love you," she said.

He stopped, turned back. "Love you, too." He knew how stupidly wide his grin was, but fuck it—he felt like the luckiest goddamn guy in a town filled to the brim with losers, and he didn't give a shit if everybody knew it. Besides, he was about to leave her to make another descent into the pit, start another search for justice on behalf of someone incapable of doing so, and he'd take what few pleasures he could find before he set out. What was that old saying about homicide detectives—*we speak for those who can't*? Well, if he and Izzy got a hold of the bastard responsible for killing Danny Lavirre, Warren would have a lot to say to him.

"See you after the show," he told Shawna, then hurried off to meet his partner.

Outside, the silly grin metamorphosed into a deep, worried frown. The lunch show was over; time to get back on the clock. He looked up, past the tops of the rundown buildings in this poor section of the city—close enough to the opulence of the Strip, and yet worlds apart

financially—to gaze at the looming presence of the Stratosphere just a few blocks away. Its saucer-shaped observation deck, the one made famous by the outdoor roller coaster that roared across its roof, always reminded him of the *Jupiter 2*, the spaceship on that old TV series *Lost in Space*, all ready for takeoff. And on the east side of the Strip, rising even higher into the bright blue sky, was the imposing sight of Merlin's Tower. According to the press, putting the Tower directly across from the Stratosphere, then building it six floors higher, not only stole away the title of tallest building in America west of the Mississippi from Bob Stupak's dream hotel/casino, but was Merlin's owners' impolite way of rubbing it in their neighbor's face. *Mine's bigger*, the Tower seemed to brag, and you couldn't find a more prominent phallic symbol outside of a brothel.

The sound of a car horn brought Warren back to Earth. He found Izzy double-parked, and got in on the passenger side of the unmarked police car. "Sorry about making you wait," he said.

"How's Shawna?" she asked.

"Good, good," he replied. He fastened his seatbelt as Izzy pulled the car into traffic. "Hey, look," Warren said awkwardly, "I appreciate you letting me meet up with her. After this morning, I just... I felt like I really needed to see her."

"Don't sweat it," Izzy replied. "A case like this, knowing some animal could beat a little kid to death with his bare hands... you gotta catch the breaks when you can, right?"

No argument there, Warren decided. "Hey, you eat?" He gestured back in the direction of the Riverboat. "I would've brought something out if you'd wanted."

Izzy gave a short laugh. "After what happened to you with the fish in that place? I'd sooner go dumpster diving. No, I'm good. I sat in the park and had some leftovers from dinner last night that I brought along."

"You know, you could've eaten with us," Warren said. "It didn't have to be at that diner. I'm sure Shawna would've been happy to go someplace else."

Izzy grinned, keeping her eyes on the road. "Oh, yeah, there's nothing like being the fifth wheel when your partner is trying to have

a quiet, intimate lunch with his significant other. Thanks, but I'll pass." She gave him a quick glance. "No offense, but I hope you're not expecting an invitation to tag along solo the next time Charlie and me go out to dinner. I mean, we like you and all, but..."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Warren assured her. "With those kids of yours, the two of you need as much alone time as possible."

"Damn straight," Izzy agreed. She maneuvered the car around Chester Stupak Park and onto Fairfield Avenue, to eventually make their way back to the Strip.

"Besides," he continued, "I get Charlie mad, he's liable to talk to some of his buddies at the power company and have them turn off my electricity."

"And then there goes all those Tombstone pizzas stacked in your freezer," she said with a smile.

"And the beer," he added in a mock serious tone. "Don't forget about the beer in the fridge. You take away my Coronas, I'm liable to go apeshit." He patted the left side of his jacket, and the shoulder holster for the 9mm handgun underneath it. "Know what I'm talking about?" he said with a sly grin.

"I'll keep that in mind," she said nonchalantly. "So, what's the next stop on the Roberto Diaz Tour?" Before Warren's lunch with Shawna, they'd spent the rest of the morning and part of the afternoon visiting the places Carolina Lavirra had told them they might find her boyfriend. So far, they'd drawn a big goose egg on locating him, but that streak of bad luck wouldn't last; they were in the middle of a gambling town, right? Sooner or later, Warren had commented as they'd cruised the streets, everybody gets at least one break, and they, if not little Danny, were due for theirs.

Warren took out his notepad, and scanned the list they'd compiled. Clipped to the book was a small photograph of Diaz. He was a compact man in his late thirties, barrel-chested and wide shouldered, with thick black hair cut short. His nose looked like it had been broken more than once and never been set quite right, and his brown eyes were set wide apart. A mustache that drooped over the corners of his mouth in a vaguely Pancho Villa-esque style obscured his upper lip, and his jawline was tinged blue with an eternal five o'clock

shadow. The white straps of the "wife-beater" T-shirt he wore in the picture were a nice touch, Warren thought; showed he was a really stylish motherfucker.

He was just as cute in person, according to his arrest record: over the last seven years, he'd accumulated a total of six counts of aggravated assault, three DUIs, a few drunk-and-disorderlies scattered here and there, and even a count of public lewdness—waving his dick at some female tourist coming out of the Golden Nugget casino. Apparently, he offered her the chance to win a different kind of jackpot if she pulled on his lever; he told the arresting officers his drinking buddies Jim Beam and his Old Granddad had put him up to it. Oh, and just for good measure, there was an order of protection against him, courtesy of a former girlfriend who'd gotten tired of Bobby whaling on her whenever the mood came over him. There were no two ways about it: Roberto Diaz was a hard man with a nasty streak in him as long as Las Vegas Boulevard, and if he didn't turn out to be Danny Lavirra's killer, Det Warren Ackerman was going to be one very surprised cop.

"1625 Ogden Avenue," he told Izzy. "According to Mrs Lavirra, Diaz has a cousin who lives there. Who's watching the apartment complex?"

"Haslinger and McBride," Izzy replied. They were also from Homicide. "They'll give us a shout if Diaz turns up."

"Nothing from the ME yet?" It wasn't as though he was expecting the cause of Danny's death to be anything other than blunt force trauma, but he wasn't a medical examiner, and it didn't pay to make assumptions. Let the coroner do her job, and he'd be able to do his own all the better.

"Nope." Izzy glanced at him. "You wanna swing by the morgue and see if Winterstern has anything for us?"

Warren thought about it for a second, then shook his head. "Nah. She'll let us know if she finds anything unusual." He drew a deep breath, then released it through his nostrils. "Y'know, Iz, it's almost kinda funny, in a sick, fucked-up way."

"What's that?" she asked. Her confused expression made it obvious she didn't know where this was going.

Warren let his head drop back against the headrest. "Back when I was a rookie, a ten year-old kid dying would've been the unusual thing; now, it's almost commonplace." He stared at the lining of the car's roof. "To tell you the truth, Izzy," he said slowly, "I'm getting sick of it all. Maybe it's time I hung it up."

She hesitated before responding. "Are you telling me you're thinking of retiring?"

"Maybe," he admitted. "And no, it's got nothing to do with you being my partner," he added quickly.

She smiled, clearly grateful to hear that. "That's good to know. So, how long have you been thinking about it?"

He turned his head to gaze out the window. The Strip was bustling, even with the rising midday temperature. Tourists must think they're impervious to heat, he considered—that, or they were just taking breaks from the frigid, air-conditioned environs of the hotels. Out of the freezer and into the fire, then back again. The circle of desert life.

"About a year," he finally replied.

"Uh-huh," she said dully. "And have you discussed it with Shawna?"

He frowned, and looked back to his partner, "No. I... I don't like talking about the job around her."

Izzy pulled the car to a halt at a red light on the corner of Oakey Boulevard, then turned to glare at him. "Why? You think you're protecting her by not telling her about the work you do, you selfish fuck?"

"Hey, whoa!" he said sharply, hands up in a gesture meant to cut off her reply. "Where's *that* coming from? *I'm* a selfish fuck? You telling me you let Charlie in on everything you do? You used to tell him about all the johns you picked up in those sting operations when you were working Vice?"

She started to say something, closed her mouth, then frowned. "No," she said quietly. "Not everything."

He nodded, pleased with himself for scoring that point. "Then you wanna explain to me how *I'm* the selfish fuck?"

"Because you don't tell Shawna *anything*—right?" she shot back. "At least I let Charlie in sometimes; better he gets it from me than by

reading it in the *Review-Journal* or hearing it on the news." The blaring of a horn from the Humvee behind them interrupted Izzy before she could continue; a none-too-subtle way of the driver letting her know the light had changed. Izzy stomped on the gas. "Besides, it's not healthy keeping that stuff bottled up inside."

"You think it's better having somebody to dump your shit on?" Warren asked. "Somebody you can burden with your problems?"

Izzy ground her teeth for a few seconds. "Jesus Christ, *now* I know why you've never gotten married," she muttered, then exhaled sharply. "Look, Warren, it's not 'dumping your shit' on somebody else, it's having somebody in your life you can turn to when you feel like the world's turned into one big goddamn cesspool. Somebody who can listen to your problems, and you can listen to theirs, without either of you judging the other. No, I don't tell Charlie everything we do on the job. God knows there are times I'd like to forget it all myself, but just knowing I have somebody to talk to when my shift's over, somebody to go home to who's loving and supportive and understanding... well, it just makes things easier to handle, y'know? Makes getting up in the morning that much better before I have to jump back into the shit pool for another hundred laps." A wistful smile played at the corners of her lips. "I thank God every day for Charlie. I don't know what I'd do without him."

"He's a good man," Warren said.

Izzy glanced at him. "So are you."

"When I'm not being a selfish fuck," he added with a half smile.

"I'm serious," she said.

"I know," he replied.

"You're lucky to have Shawna."

Warren nodded. "No argument there."

"And she's lucky to have you," Izzy continued. "But keeping her at arm's length is no way to build a relationship, even if you think you're doing it for her benefit. And if you're thinking of calling it quits... well, then the two of you *really* need to sit down and have a long talk."

Warren sat quietly, staring out through the windshield. With the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, he gently tugged at his

bottom lip, mulling over Izzy's argument. She was right, of course; he might be a selfish fuck, but he wasn't a stupid one. He did need to come clean with Shawna, let her know what he'd been considering, give her a chance to let him know how she felt about it. The question now was when he should do it... and whether he'd have the balls to open the topic for discussion when that time came.

"Thinking about it?" Izzy asked. "You know I'm right, don't you?"

"Shut up," he said pleasantly. "You wanna crow, go stand on the roof of your building and wait for the sun to come up tomorrow morning."

"Cock-a-doodle-do," Izzy said with a big grin.

"Yeah, yeah," Warren replied with mock huffiness. "Just drive the fuckin' car, all right?"

Izzy laughed, knowing she'd scored the final goal, and turned her concentration to the road.

Maybe tonight, Warren thought, when he picked Shawna up after the show.

Or maybe not.

Shawna watched as Warren joined Izzy in the car, and they drove off. He'd seemed almost eager for an excuse to get away from her, and from the haunted look in his eyes, she knew it had to do with whatever new case he was working on. It must have been a really bad one, she considered; most homicides didn't have such a noticeable effect on him. Not that he'd tell her if they did.

In a way, it was sort of quaint how Warren always tried to sidestep the issue when she asked him about work. She knew what he was doing, trying not to worry her about the gruesome murders he investigated, the dangers he sometimes faced in tracking down the killers. Trying to protect her from the bad men and the bad things they did.

Shawna, however, didn't quite see it that way. To her, Warren's reluctance meant he was locking her out from a part of his life—an important part—and she didn't like it one bit. Sure, she might be

terrified of the big cats at *Magipalooza!*, but she wasn't fragile—she'd worked a night shift at a strip joint downtown, the most dangerous area in Las Vegas, hadn't she? Anybody who could survive that wasn't the sort of person who'd fall apart when they heard about a murder. Besides, watching that TV show *CSI* all these years had prepared her to hear the more disgusting aspects of Warren's cases... somewhat. After all, the autopsy stuff on *CSI* was all special effects and make-up; it wasn't real. And to be honest about it, she'd tried to watch a real autopsy on an HBO special—once. She'd gotten as far as realizing that the reason she couldn't see the corpse's face was because the coroner had cut loose the guy's scalp and peeled it down to cover his features; then she was running for the bathroom to throw up. After that, the rest of the evening had been spent watching the DVD boxed set of *Sex and the City: Season Three*. Carnality and shopping: two things guaranteed to take her mind off faceless cadavers. Three things, actually; she still had the hots for Chris Noth—Mr Big on the show—all the way back to when he was Mike Logan on *Law & Order*.

Maybe in retrospect she didn't really need to know all the details of Warren's cases. But that didn't mean he had to shut her out completely. After all, bottling up his job-related emotions, the anger, the frustration, the horror, when they got together couldn't be doing him any good psychologically.

Or physically, for that matter. Warren might resist any discussion of how he felt about the job, but she could plainly see the stress it was putting on him. It was in the weary set of his shoulders, the heavy tread of his walk, the dim light in his eyes—eyes that rarely sparkled with laughter anymore. Warren still possessed his odd sense of humor, but it had become darker over the last six months, even macabre in tone. He looked and sounded like a man who had been beaten down hard and often, and that, more than his reluctance to discuss the matter, was what truly worried Shawna.

She'd considered bringing up the possibility of him quitting the force, a notion that occurred to her more often these days than she'd be willing to admit, but had always stopped herself from voicing the question. Warren was dedicated to his work, she knew that, and

asking him to stop being a cop, if only for his health, would be like him asking her to give up dancing. And since *that* was never going to happen, barring serious injury or old age, she couldn't very well pressure him to do something he'd never think of doing himself.

Shawna sighed. Maybe she was going at it the wrong way. So she wouldn't talk to Warren about leaving the job, but there was nothing wrong about suggesting he needed a break. She could convince him to take a few days off to clear his head, to recharge his batteries, as her dad would say. That wouldn't sound like she was being pushy, just concerned.

Yeah, she thought with a smile, I could do that.

"Bailed on you, huh?"

Shawna started, nudged out of her reverie by the intruding voice. She looked up to find the waitress standing before her. "Excuse me?"

"Your boyfriend," the waitress said. "He run out on you?"

Shawna smiled and shook her head. "No, he had to go; he's a cop. Had to get back on the clock."

"Oh. Okay." The waitress looked at the order pad in her hand. "Stuck you with the bill, though. Got a lot on his mind, huh?"

Shawna chuckled. "Yeah, guess you could say that. But I'll make sure he makes up for this." She winked slyly.

The waitress smiled. "Mm-hmm. Make sure he gives you a little somethin' extra for the aggravation."

"You know it," Shawna replied.

The waitress tallied up the amount for the two orders, then tore off the bill and placed it facedown on the table. "You have a good day, now."

"You, too," Shawna said. The woman nodded and walked away.

Shawna dug into her purse for her wallet. Despite the joking around, she knew Warren would never have intended to stiff her on lunch; apparently, her work question had rattled him more than she thought. Of course, that made her even more curious than usual. What could he be investigating now that asking if it were a "big case" would have such an effect on him? Maybe she'd turn on the radio when she got back to the dressing area and see if one of the local radio stations had any news about it.

Hey, an intelligent girlfriend was a well-informed girlfriend, right? At least it continued to show she was interested in what he did for a living. And maybe by mentioning in a conversation that she knew what he was up to, she could get him to open up to her about everything else he kept refusing to discuss. The question was when she should broach the subject and whether she'd have the courage to actually go through with it when that time came.

Shawna left a three-dollar tip for the waitress, paid the cashier for the meal, and left the airconditioned comfort of The Riverboat for the sweltering heat of a Nevada afternoon. She put on the pair of sunglasses she kept in her purse, then looked up at the Tower, standing tall and impressive against the bright blue sky... and an idea began to form. Tomorrow was her one day off—no dancer could handle more than the required six shows a week—so maybe she could convince Warren to take her out for dinner tonight, up on the Tower's rooftop observation deck. The view couldn't be beat, and he'd never gotten sick from the food at the Lady of the Lake restaurant up there... although the stomach-churning, high-speed elevator ride to get there had made her turn a little green once or twice. Still, the nausea would be worth the trip if it helped pry the cork loose from that emotional bottle he always carried around.

Shawna smiled. Yeah, she thought, that's the ticket. A great view, a romantic, candlelit dinner, a cool desert breeze... Put it all together, and you'll get one relaxed cop. The fact that he'd be trapped on the roof, in a public setting where he couldn't make a scene if she pressed too hard, made it just about foolproof.

It was a simple plan, but a perfect one. As far as she could tell.

SEVEN

The day had gone a lot better than he could have hoped, but that was just Tom's opinion. He still couldn't tell how Allie felt after their reconciliation in the hotel lobby, but then her moods had always been hard to read. She was a girl who liked to keep her own counsel, as his mom would say, liked to play things close to the vest. He'd never really been sure what the second part of that meant, but had a good idea it was something to do with the annoying habit Allie had of hiding her true emotions... when it suited her, of course. Considering the blow-up she'd had this morning in their hotel room, it was pretty clear she didn't have any problem with expressing her anger about the marriage.

Like it was his fault. Like it'd been his idea. *She* was the one who wanted to tie the knot, not him; he was just the inebriated monkey who'd agreed to go along with it. Okay, so maybe he could have put the brakes on the whole thing when they were both bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, and standing in the county clerk's office, filing for a marriage license, but goddammit, he loved this woman; had loved her since the first time they'd met. He *wanted* to marry her. He wanted to be her husband. So what if the way it happened was as a spur of the moment thing? So what if—he was almost ashamed to admit it—this morning he'd been starting to have second thoughts about it? He was still willing to try and make it work, still willing to try to make her happy in her new role as Mrs Tom Gaines, even though he knew neither of them were ready for this kind of long-term commitment, that it would turn both their lives completely out of whack. And he had been completely sincere about it when he told her so.

So Allie had called a truce after that old lady from the elevator had talked their ears off, and hadn't *that* stunned the shit outta him? It should have made Tom happy, but that sudden turnaround in her attitude had only put him on his guard; it was that old inability to read her mood swings popping up again. He'd spent the rest of the day waiting for the other proverbial shoe to drop.

The second big surprise of the day? That shoe never fell. Or at least it hadn't fallen yet.

They'd hit the casino as planned, but settled for dropping some cash at the dollar slot machines instead of the poker tables; Allie wanted to build up her nerve before trying that out. But instead of losing money, Tom had won a one hundred dollar jackpot—after feeding about fifty bucks into the thing, that is. But, as any long-time gambler could tell you, sometimes breaking even was almost as good as winning; making back twice your investment was pure gravy. The minor windfall had put Tom and Allie in a better mood so much so the topic of marriage was quickly forgotten. Or maybe it was just that *he'd* forgotten it, and Allie had decided to let it go for the time being. Whatever the reason, they'd finally started having the kind of fun they'd been expecting when they arrived in Vegas.

From the Tower, they'd gone out to do some of the touristy things that people did in Las Vegas: visit other casinos on the Strip to see what they were like; do some shopping at the Forum Shops mall at Caesar's Palace; check out the Bellagio's Gallery of Fine Arts (there was a Monet exhibition on display Allie wanted to see); take a ride on the roller coaster at New York, New York. The Star Trek Experience at the Hilton, one of Tom's reasons for agreeing to accompany Allie on the trip, they'd decided to save for another day. But Allie swore they'd see it before they left Vegas, because she knew all too well how disappointed he'd be if they didn't.

Yes, he was a Trekkie, or Trekker, or whatever the current descriptive title was; Allie had always settled on "geek". That, she explained, was a term that never went out of style. Not that he didn't give her shit about being addicted, first to *The Sopranos*, then to all those poker tournament shows on cable. But it was hard to argue his case when all she had to do was point to the documentary *Trekkies* to prove how disturbingly bizarre his side of fandom could be. Still, if taking a 3D ride in a "shuttle" with Klingons in hot pursuit made Tom happy, she was willing to put up with his Seven of Nine/Jeri Ryan fantasies for an hour. Just as long, she warned, as he didn't try talking her into wearing a silver body stocking afterward—silver made her look fat. Tom begged to differ, for which she was grateful,

but it still wasn't going to get her to indulge in some roleplaying games. Or, as she'd put it:

"I think some of the things we do in bed are adventurous enough without you pretending to be Captain Kirk and me being the naughty robot-girl."

"Borg," he'd corrected her.

She'd rolled her eyes and shrugged. "Whatever."

Like talk of their newlywed status, Tom had wisely chosen to let the *Star Trek* discussion fade into the background while they continued their tour of the Strip. Third biggest surprise of the day? Allie had held his hand as they strolled along, like they were a real married couple. If she was starting to get into it, and he could only assume she was by how well the day had gone, then he felt twice as bad now about having had second thoughts.

"What'cha thinking about?" Allie asked.

"Hmm?" Tom snapped back to attention. He hadn't realized there'd been a lull in the conversation they were having, but obviously there must have been if she was subtly pointing it out.

He looked to see if anyone else had noticed him jerking awake, but the other customers around them were concerned with their own affairs. He and Allie were seated at a small table by the front window at a Starbuck's just west of the Strip, on Stardust Road. Unlike the typical in-your-face, neon-lit décor of just about everything else in Las Vegas, the coffeehouse looked pretty much the same as every other store Tom had visited in the world-dominating franchise: exposed brickface walls, lots of deep brown and tan colored furnishings, intimate lighting, big comfy chairs and loveseats. The patrons, too, didn't look all that different from anyone he saw in other Starbuck's, or even from the customers at the coffee shop where Allie worked. At another table sat a goateed man in his late twenties, his two middle fingers quickly stabbing at the keyboard of his laptop computer—a writer of some sort, Tom imagined. There always seemed to be at least one writer seated at these kind of places,

like it was a requirement for the store in order to maintain its "trendy" status. A couple of hot-looking blondes in Baby-Doll Ts and tight jeans, probably showgirls or, even better, strippers, were huddled on a couch against a wall, talking about something they found amusing; from the glances they kept making his way, he hoped it wasn't him. A bald-headed, thirty-something business type in a short-sleeved shirt and loosened tie was yammering away on a cell phone, loud enough to make sure everybody in the place knew how important he was—"everybody" meaning the two hot blondes. The rest of the clientele mainly consisted of college-age guys and girls too busy drinking coffee and talking shit amongst themselves to pay attention to Mr Important Businessman.

Tom turned back to Allie. "Uh... what was I saying?"

"You weren't. You just drifted off there," she explained. "Like I did in the elevator this morning."

"Oh." He paused, mind racing to come up with something to say that didn't involve marriage. He grinned. "I was just thinking about how beautiful you look."

Her eyes went wide, and she smiled. "Wow, was *that* a bunch of crap."

"Huh?" he said, taking the role of wounded lover. It was his best shot at hiding his true thoughts. He might not have ever been able to figure Allie out, but she could always see through him. And if his expressions and body language were giving him away again (probably the real reason he'd never taken up card-playing; he had a lousy poker face)... well, so much for the day remaining enjoyable.

"How beautiful I look." Allie wagged a stern finger at him. "You only blurt out shit like that when you get caught at something," she eyed him suspiciously. "So what made you say it this time?"

Aw, crap, he thought. Better put on your taps, Tommy. You got a lotta dancin' to do.

"So? It's true," he insisted, and put on a display of looking annoyed. Not too angry, not too pouty; he always sounded like a little kid when he got pouty, and he hated when he did it.

"So, maybe it is," Allie replied, "and you're a smart man for saying so, but romantic stuff like that never pours outta you without a

reason; not unless you've got something in mind." Her eyes narrowed, and she leaned over the table. "You're thinking about me in that Jeri Ryan costume, aren't you?" she asked in a hoarse whisper.

Inwardly, Tom breathed a sigh of relief; this time, apparently, she wasn't able to read his mind. Or maybe he'd subconsciously been working on that poker face.

He waved a dismissive hand and leaned back in his chair. Run with it, boy, he thought. Keep that distraction going. "We'll, I'd be lying if I said no."

"Except *I'm* the one saying 'no,'" she said, and pointed to herself. "Me. The one who'd have to get all greased up just to fit into the thing—not that I'm saying I would."

"Uh-huh," Tom said, smiling broadly. He was already picturing it in his mind's eye, and if Allie could see that he was just by looking at him—well, fuck it. Learn to live with it, baby. A man's entitled to his fantasies, right?

"Yeah," she continued. "The one who'd..." She paused to look around at the other patrons, to see if any of them were listening to the conversation. They didn't appear to be, but she leaned even farther across the table nonetheless, and gestured for him to do the same. "Who'd look like Moby Dick in it," she whispered in his ear.

Well, didn't *that* just bust up his fuckin' illusion! Where the hell did that come from? "Moby Dick?" he asked.

Allie pointed past his shoulder, at no one in particular. "Hey, Tom, is that the Great White Whale in your bedroom?" 'No, jackass, that's my wi—'" She halted in mid-sentence, her eyes almost bugging out as she realized what she'd been about to say. Then she fell silent, and slowly closed her mouth. She suddenly looked uncomfortable, and sat back in her seat.

Oh, shit, Tom thought. Here we go.

"My wife," Allie murmured. Then she chuckled softly. No freaking out, no tears, no talking about what a mistake this all was. Number four in a series of surprises for the day, Tom thought. Collect 'em all.

"There," she said with a tiny nod. "That wasn't so hard to say, now was it?"

"I..." he began. Slow now, Tom, take it easy. You've gotta say something, just don't make it something stupid. "I was hoping it wouldn't be."

He meant it to sound friendly and jokey; you know—encouraging. But suddenly, he could see the other shoe, precariously balanced on the edge of a table. All it would take was the smallest vibration to send it tumbling to the floor.

Allie smiled. "Yeah. Guess I'm still in that 'breaking it in' phase. You know, like shoes." She winked.

Shit! Tom thought. There she goes with the fuckin' X-ray vision again! Maybe she *did* know what I was thinking the whole time.

"So, anything else you wanna check out?" she asked. Changing the subject quickly, he noticed. Allie flipped her wrist over to look at her watch. "The day's still young; it's only five."

Tom shrugged. "I don't know. What do you feel like doing?"

She raised an eyebrow and frowned at him. "Isn't this how we started out this morning? After the shouting match, I mean."

"Yeah, well, you know I'm not the biggest tourist around," Tom replied, feeling a little embarrassed by the admission. "This is the farthest west I've ever been."

Now both eyebrows rose. "Really?" she asked. "You've never been to California?"

He shook his head. "Nope."

"Wow." Allie sat up and leaned forward again. She had a look on her face like she'd just had a major idea. "You know, it's just over the border. We could rent a car and take a drive down to Barstow."

"What's in Barstow?" he asked.

"Uh..." She paused, then shrugged. "I don't know. I've never been there. But I *did* fly to San Diego a couple times to see my Aunt Kristen."

"So why don't we go to San Diego?"

She shook her head. "Too far away. At least Barstow is pretty close to the Nevada border, so we could make the whole trip in a day."

Tom scratched his jaw for a few seconds, thinking it over. "And we'd drive there and back just for the sake of doing it?"

"Well, there must be *something* to see," Allie replied. "I mean, people live there, right? All I'm saying is that we could go there so you can at least say you've been to California."

"Maybe." He grimaced. "I don't know."

"We'll still go to the *Star Trek* thing," she replied in singsong fashion. She grinned big and wide, turning on the charm.

Tom smiled, then held up his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay. You win."

"Of course I win, *Star Trek* boy," Allie said. She flashed a mischievous smile. "Don't you know 'resistance is futile'?"

Tom's eyebrows did a quick scuttle up his forehead. "Oh, so you *have* been thinking about it."

"*Thinking* about it," she admitted, then held up a warning index finger. "But thinking and doing are two separate things, okay? All I'm doing is..."

"Keeping an open mind?" he asked.

She nodded. "Exactly. I haven't agreed to anything."

Now he was the one grinning. "Yet."

She stared at him for a moment, then glanced at the empty coffee cup in front of her. "Yet," she admitted quietly.

Tom nodded, but said nothing. As long as she was considering it, there was no point in trying to push the issue... although, knowing Allie, even if she agreed to playing dress-up, she'd probably find some way to use it to get back at him for the "unstoppable fuck machine" comment he'd let slip this morning. She had a long memory and even though she hadn't mentioned that insult since the dust-up, it didn't mean she'd completely put it out of her mind.

No, Tom might have always had trouble reading Allie's mood swings, but he could always tell when *something* was going on in that head of hers; her eyes practically lit up when the idea formed. All he could hope for was to figure out what it was she was planning, and whether her revenge would play out in the hotel room, or on this trip to Barstow she was suddenly so eager to take.

Arlen knew there was something going on with this guy the minute he came into the laundromat, just after six o'clock. For one thing, he didn't have any bags of laundry with him; the other tip-off was how nervous he looked, and not just because he might have lost his dry cleaning ticket. About ten seconds after he quick-stepped through the door, an LVPD patrol car cruised by down the street; from its reduced rate of speed, it was clear the cops inside were looking for somebody.

Of course, that didn't mean they were looking for this guy in particular—ducking out of the way was pretty much an instinctual action for anyone who'd had a few run-ins with cops. Hell, there were times when Arlen found himself doing it, and he hadn't broken any law in... oh, six months, maybe. (Yeah, okay, so he'd been a little too drunk and a little too loud when he got busted. But he'd actually had a good night of gambling, for once, and felt like doing a little celebrating. Too bad part of his winnings had to go toward paying the fine.) So maybe this guy watching the cop car hadn't done anything, either, but old habits are always hard to break.

On the other hand, Arlen had to admit the new arrival looked like bad news—the stench of trouble practically rolled off him like cheap cologne. (Arlen smiled. He liked the sound of that analogy, and jotted it down on the back of a dry cleaning bill. Never know when you could use that in a conversation, he figured.) He was a Spanish guy, probably Mexican, about average height, with a thick Pancho Villa mustache and heavy five o'clock shadow. He looked the type who used a lot of styling gel to sweep back his hair, but between the oppressive heat of the day and the sweat pouring out of him, not even Vidal Sassoon could help this guy. Not that he'd ever be confused with one of those male model types from the TV commercials—not with that beer gut hanging over the belt of his grease-marked jeans. The "wife-beater" T-shirt was a nice touch; really brought out the color of his eyes.

Cold, hard, dangerous-looking eyes. They showed up real well through the lens of the security camera that was pointed toward the door.

Yeah, this guy was trouble, all right, but Arlen couldn't have him hanging around unless he had business here. Mr Kim, the owner, would kick his ass if he later checked the tape from that camera, as he did every morning, and found out Arlen had allowed somebody to treat the laundromat like a hideout. Saying he'd just wanted to possibly avoid getting killed wouldn't be considered a good enough excuse. So there was only one thing to do: try and get the guy to leave. Politely. Non-confrontationally.

And non-violently. That was the most important thing to Arlen as he stepped out from behind the counter. Getting killed an hour into his shift over trying to throw somebody out of a friggin' *laundry* wasn't too high on his list of ways to shuffle off the ole mortal coil; in fact, it didn't even rate. The key to getting out of this situation in one piece, therefore, was to be polite, be helpful, be friendly. Cajole instead of insist. Nudge instead of push. Hell, once the guy was convinced the cops were gone, he might even leave without being asked.

But, no, that wasn't about to happen, and Arlen could tell it right away. The guy stepped away from the door and plopped down into one of the plastic chairs that were lined up against the right wall—just far enough back from the windows that he could watch the street without being seen from outside. No, he wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

"Fuck," Arlen said quietly, head drooping onto his chest. He sighed, then raised his head, straightened the lapels on his jacket, and forced a smile. Nothing left to do but turn on the ole Ploog charm.

He walked quickly up to the man, arms spread wide, like he was greeting a big roller at the doors of the MGM Grand. "Good evening, sir! Welcome to the Big Apple! My name's Arlen, and I'll be your host during your stay with us. I hope it'll be a pleasant one."

The man said nothing, just turned his head around long enough to give him a hard warning stare. An unspoken "Fuck off" passed along from guest to host. Then he went back to looking out the windows.

From the corner of his eye, Arlen could see a couple of the other customers watching the scene. One was a Latina woman in her

forties, about sixty or so pounds overweight, with the sort of haggard look that could only come from having to deal with about a half-dozen kids in a too-small apartment; washing mounds of dirty clothes at the laundromat was probably the only break she got from them. Mrs Alvarez, if Arlen remembered correctly. The woman beside her was also Latina, and almost as heavy, but looked about half Mrs Alvarez's age; maybe she was her daughter. They exchanged quiet words, like commentators at a golf match, only in Spanish. Maybe the daughter was translating; on the few occasions he'd spoken with Mrs Alvarez, it was clear she'd never really mastered English.

He turned to face them and nodded pleasantly. "You ladies doing all right? Anything I can get for you?" The words you nosy fuckin' bitches didn't quite make it to his lips.

Mrs Alvarez said something to her companion. The woman nodded and looked to Arlen. "No, we good."

"Great." He flashed a smile, and waved a hand at them, like a game show host pointing to a contestant. "Don't hesitate to let me know if you change your minds, though, all right?" Then he jerked a thumb in the direction of the cop-ducker. "If you'll excuse me," he said to the women, and turned back to his problem. "So," he began, "is there something I can do for you, sir? Are you here to pick up some laundry?"

Nothing. The guy continued to keep track of the world outside, either ignoring Arlen or just completely oblivious to his presence. Probably a combination of both.

"Maybe you're waiting for someone?"

Zippo. Yeah, he was ignoring Arlen, all right. Guess he figured the warning stare was all he'd needed to get his point across; he was just going to pretend he was deaf until this pain in the ass gave up and went away.

For about two seconds, Arlen considered doing just that: turning around, going back behind the counter, and watching the ten-inch, black-and-white TV set Mr Kim kept on the shelf below the cash register. Let the motherfucker sit there all he wanted until he felt like leaving; it wasn't worth getting into it with him. But then Arlen

glanced over his shoulder at the watchful eye of the security camera—and those of the other customers—and knew that backing down wasn't an option. Not if he wanted to keep his job.

"Look, pal," he said, a little more forcefully, "unless you've got business here, I'm gonna have to ask you to leave."

Still no effect... unless you counted the guy folding his arms across his chest as a response. It probably meant *Yeah? And what're you gonna do about it if I don't, asshole?*, although he didn't bother to turn around to voice the question. Actions speaking louder than words, and all that.

Well, Arlen concluded, in for a penny, in for a pound, as they say. Just hope those aren't the words they carve on my tombstone.

He stepped forward and put his hand on the guy's shoulder. "Look," he said sternly, "you've gotta—"

His stomach exploded before he could get out another word—well, not really exploded, but the guy's ham-sized fist had slammed into it with such force the air was driven out of Arlen's lungs. He crashed to his knees, his vision filled with black spots that swirled and dipped and spun like the galaxies he'd seen once at a space exhibit sky show at the Museum of Natural History. Only these weren't anywhere near as pretty; they looked more like big blobs of ink let loose in zero gravity.

"Who you think you grabbin', you cocksuckin' prick?" the guy bellowed in his ear. "You think you a tough guy, you gonna t'row me out, you fuckin' piece o' shit?" It was funny, in a way; his accent kinda reminded Arlen of the one Al Pacino put on in *Scarface*. Say hello to my little friend... "Not so tough now, huh, chingón?"

Arlen gasped, trying to get back the air he'd lost. He knew his mouth was moving, but no words were coming out.

The guy's hands closed around the lapels of Arlen's jacket and pulled him closer. "What's wrong, puto? I don't hear you talkin' shit no more."

"L-look..." Arlen managed to wheeze out.

The man shook him. "Look at what, fucker? Look at how I'm gonna kick you fuckin' ass?"

Arlen shook his head, although it only multiplied the numbers of spots dancing before his eyes. "I... I don't want any trouble..."

The man laughed, and slapped him on the side of the head. "Yeah? You shoulda thought of that before you tried fuckin' with me—right?" He slapped him again, harder this time. "Still gonna t'row me out? Huh, shitface? Still gonna tell me to get out?"

So, this is how it ends, Arlen dimly thought. Gettin' my brains beat out 'cause some asshole decided to duck in here instead of the 99-cent store next door, just to keep my fuckin' job. Who needs this shit?

"Let him go!" somebody screamed. It sounded like Mrs Alvarez's daughter... or whoever the hell she was. Arlen was too busy counting black dots to get a good look.

"Chupa mi pito, quedada!" the guy yelled. Arlen didn't know what it meant, but it probably wasn't a compliment. From the startled gasp the woman gave, that was pretty much a sure bet.

"You on the TV, cabrón!" she shot back.

It took Arlen a second or two for that comment to make it through the gauze wrapped around his brain, but eventually he came to realize she was talking about the security camera. His muddled vision cleared just enough for him to see the guy staring past him, at the all-seeing eye in the ceiling.

"Smile," Arlen said with a stupid grin. "You're on *Candid Camera*, asshole."

The man looked from him to the camera, then back again. There was a confused look on his face, like he wasn't sure what to do next. If it was a choice between running out or killing everybody in the place so there were no witnesses, then pocketing the tape, Arlen was silently praying he'd go with the former. But considering the Ploog luck in matters of gambling, well.

For some reason, though, Lady Luck must have decided to smile on him. The guy released his stranglehold on Arlen and shoved him away. Arlen collapsed on the floor like a boneless chicken (an analogy he figured he'd never repeat to anyone, if only to spare himself the embarrassment), grateful that with all that had just

transpired, he'd managed not to wet his pants. Although he was certainly in the right place to clean them if he did.

But then the guy walked up to loom over him, and Arlen felt his bladder do a little shimmy.

"You tell the cops I was here, chilito," the man hissed through gritted teeth, "and all the bitches in the neighborhood won't save you sorry ass." He thrust a warning index finger in Arlen's face. "You hear me?"

"Y-yeah. I hear you," Arlen swore. "No cops."

At least no cops until after you leave, fucker, he thought.

The man balled up his meaty fist and drew it back, preparing to strike. Arlen raised his hands to protect his face, and drew his legs up into a slight fetal position, waiting for the impact.

It never came. Instead, he heard the entry bell ring as the front door opened, then closed. When he opened his eyes, the man was gone.

Arlen gave a hollow, nervous laugh. "Thank you, Jesus," he muttered, then looked to the other side of the laundromat, to Mrs Alvarez and her companion. "*Muchas gracias*," he said lamely.

"*De nada*," the younger woman replied, and took a step forward. "Are you okay, Mr Arlen?"

Arlen picked himself up off the floor, waving off her gesture of aid. "Oh, yeah. I'm fine. Really. No need to bother yourself." He gestured at a door at the rear of the store, marked "employees only". "I'm just gonna go sit in the back for a few minutes. Just wanna catch my breath." He offered an awkward smile. "Some asshole, huh?" he said, nodding toward the front door. "Man, the types we get in here sometimes. If he knows what's good for him, he won't come around this place again."

He set off on his trip to the back room, step-staggering along the way, his left hand pressed against his stomach as he forced himself to remain upright instead of doubled over. Bad enough he just got his ass kicked in front of the customers; whining like a little girl about the tummy ache he got from the big, bad man would only make things worse. Once he got behind a closed door, however, he'd do whatever the fuck he felt like: whine, moan, put his goddamn foot

through a box of Tide to blow off some of the anger he was feeling. He was owed that much, wasn't he, for the shit he'd just had to go through, right?

And yet, although his guts ached like they'd been hit with a shovel, and every step toward the employee "lounge" seemed like a Herculean effort, Arlen couldn't help but smile. So, it wasn't his time to die, then. That was reassuring; in fact, it was downright encouraging. Now he could maybe concentrate on other things.

Like making sure the security tape had actually been in the recorder, so the cops would have some thing to work with when he handed it to them.

And getting the urine stains out of his slacks.

EIGHT

He didn't call the cops, though; didn't even bother to check on the security tape. As he sat watching his piss-soaked pants rolling around in the washer, Arlen had plenty of time to do some serious thinking.

Okay, so odds were good that Tony Montana wannabe would never come into the laundromat again; and if he did, let it be during another shift. Let Mr Kim or Bartolo Sanchez deal with that shit. Yeah, maybe if Arlen tipped off the cops, they'd be able to track down the fucker and put him away on an assault charge. Mrs Alvarez and her friend would never step up as witnesses, if he knew his customers, but if Arlen's beat-down was caught on tape, that was all the evidence the District Attorney would need to prosecute him. Trouble was, the most time the guy would have to serve was a few months, maybe a year, then guess who he'd be looking for the day he got out of the friendly environs of High Desert State Prison? And knowing what kind of badass this guy was, he wouldn't show up here looking to bury his foot in Arlen's colon—he'd be showing up with a gun, to make sure he got his point across about what happens to people who go blabbing to the cops when he's told them not to.

Well, that was never going to happen. One close call with the Grim Reaper's scythe was more than enough for Arlen Ploog; he'd been warned, he'd play it smart and keep his mouth shut. Time heals all wounds, right? So that meant eventually he'd put this embarrassing little incident behind him (he'd certainly had prior experience with other situations in his life), and the customers would forget all about "Mr Arlen" getting bitch-slapped right in front of them. Not immediately, though; by the time his shift was over at 1:00am, everybody in the neighborhood would know how Mrs Alvarez's daughter (if that's who she was) had saved him from a trip to the emergency room... and how he'd pissed his pants. That was all right. Before the night was over, he planned to get so absolutely shit-faced he wouldn't care who knew what happened this afternoon.

But not before he'd made the rounds at the Tower, he reminded himself. Getting spooked by some refugee from a Mexican wrestling flick was no reason to break with tradition, and tonight, like every night, was his quality gambling time. He'd get in a few hands of poker, at least, before hitting the sauce. Gambling and heavy drinking were a bad combination—the trick was in finding the delicate balance between the two. Arlen, unfortunately, was still trying to find it. As he'd learned firsthand over the years, you could fuck that Kenny Rogers shit about knowing when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em; knowing when to put down the glass of Johnny Walker and stop getting sloppy with the cards was the important thing to focus on, "when you're sittin' at the table."

Cards first, then some heavy-duty liquid mind-numbing to forget all about the scary Latino boogeyman. Tomorrow would be a new day, and hopefully by then the jerk should be a hundred miles away, pummeling the crap out of some other poor unfortunate.

By the time his trousers had tumbled dry, Arlen had his late night activities well planned out... and none of them involved dropping a dime to the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department.

The only thing Tom was apparently looking to drop when they returned to their hotel room was onto the bed. It had been an exhaustive day, and, at least for Allie, an informative one.

So, he'd fantasized about getting her to play dress-up, like the geeks she saw on TV when a local news crew covered some big comic book and science fiction convention held every year in Chicago. Well, wasn't *that* an interesting revelation about her new hubby? He'd sure been keeping it a secret from her all these years, although, in hindsight, it shouldn't have come as such a surprise. After all, in junior year at college, he'd practically begged her on Halloween to put on a pair of black go-go boots and a red, one-piece swimsuit that was nothing more than a couple of crossed satin strips barely holding her boobs in place (and where *had* he gotten an outfit like that on such "short" notice?). "Vampire Ella" or something like that was the

character—some vampire girl from a comic book she'd never heard of; she'd stopped paying attention to those when she discovered boys. She'd agreed to wear it, but then she made a lot of bad choices that year; besides, playing a half-naked goth chick for one night totally paled in comparison to what happened a few months later on *that night*.

Yes, she'd thought it was a stupid idea, not to mention a sexist, degrading one, but she was in love, and a little bit high, and she couldn't let her man down, could she? After all, wasn't making a spectacle of herself expected of someone who was an "unstoppable fuck machine"?

A devilish smile pushed up the corners of Allie's lips. No, she hadn't forgotten that little slip of the tongue from this morning. Hadn't forgotten it at all.

With a weary sigh, Tom dropped the half-dozen large shopping bags they'd accumulated on the floor and flopped full-length onto the bed. "I'm done," he muttered into the pillow where his face had landed.

Yeah, Allie thought, same old short-stamina Tom. Good to see married life hasn't caused any shocking changes in him. "Feel like taking a nap, Grandpa?" she asked.

"Mm-hmm," he replied. "We must've walked ten miles today. My feet are killin' me."

Actually, it was maybe not even half of that. The monorail that linked a number of the casinos on the east side of the Strip, from the MGM Grand to Bally's, had cut down on some of their steps, and they'd initially taken a cab from Merlin's Tower all the way down to the pyramidal Luxor, from which they'd started their excursion. All the walking came just from wandering through the hotels and checking out the attractions, although once you got past the major differences in architectural design from one to the next, the basic layouts of the casinos started to look alike after a while. Lots of slot machines, lots of card tables, no clocks, no windows. And, of course, there were all the stores they'd visited after their stop-off at Starbuck's to recharge their batteries with much-needed caffeine. Odd little tourist traps just off the beaten path, where the prices for

Vegas-themed tchotchkies-T-shirts, coffee mugs, pens and the like—were far more reasonable than those charged for the same items by the hotel gift shops.

Allie had stocked up on quite a few mementos for friends and family; maybe even a few too many. But Aunt Ida, her mom's sister, would have never forgiven her if she didn't come home with a little plastic snow globe. The very notion of finding such a thing in a desert location had struck Allie as more than a little odd when Ida had made the request, but damned if she didn't find one in a shop on Desert Inn Road: a miniaturized collection of plastic representations of the Luxor's Sphinx, the MGM Grand's golden lion, New York, New York's Statue of Liberty, and Paris's Eiffel Tower, all sealed under water inside a hand-sized half-globe. And since this was Las Vegas, Nevada, and not Aspen, Colorado, there couldn't very well be little flakes of plastic snow swirling around inside it; in keeping with the style of the city, the manufacturer had replaced the snow with tiny bits of glitter. Well, that made perfect sense. Allie had wound up buying one for herself.

Still, as she gazed at Tom's prone figure, Allie had to admit they *had* been on their feet for most of the day, and had covered a lot of ground. And, okay, maybe her dogs were barkin', too, as mom would say when her own feet ached. So, perhaps Tom had the right idea—taking a break wasn't such a bad idea, now that she thought about it. Vegas was a 24/7 city, after all, and the real fun didn't start until after the sun went down. It was just that, well, she was only twenty-five years old, for God's sake. The idea of taking a nap at her age just made her feel... old. Like she was about to start cashing in social security checks to buy cat food to eat, and wearing Depends so she wouldn't poop her clothes.

And yet, Tom looked so comfortable on the bed—hell, he was lightly snoring already—and she really *could* do with taking off her sneakers, just for a little bit, just to give her toes a break, and... and...

Well, what harm would it do?

Allie walked around to the other side and sat on the edge of the bed. She unlaced her sneakers, pulled them off, and tossed them

aside, then rubbed her weary toes. "Oh, yeah," she moaned pleasantly, that's the ticket."

As she sat back against the pillows, her gaze fell on the breakfast table across the room. The cups and dishes had been cleared away hours ago by Housekeeping, but the hotel brochure Tom had been looking at that morning was still lying on it. For some reason she couldn't fathom—not that she really focused on the motivating factor —she felt compelled to walk over and look at it.

The pamphlet was open to a two-page photograph of a marvelous night-time view of the Strip, taken from a high altitude. According to the caption underneath the picture, it was taken from The Lady of the Lake, the four-star restaurant located on the Tower's roof. A smaller photograph set inside the night scene showed a couple, a well-dressed man and woman who were either models or actors, no doubt, seated at a table near a floor-to-ceiling window. They held up champagne flutes in a mock toast, the glasses perfectly catching the light of the neon city below. "The Perfect Spot for a Romantic Las Vegas Dinner for Two" stated the caption under the happy couple.

Allie raised her right hand to her mouth, and began lightly scraping the edge of the thumbnail against her teeth. It was an unconscious action, one she tended to perform while deep in thought. And right then, an idea was beginning to take shape.

She picked up the brochure and walked it back to the bed. She again sat down, this time with her knees drawn up so she could lay the pamphlet across her thighs in order to concentrate on the photographs.

"The perfect spot for a romantic Las Vegas dinner for two," she muttered, and chewed on her thumbnail a little more. She looked at Tom, wrapped snugly in the arms of Morpheus, and slowly the idea clicked into place.

They needed to discuss the marriage, and she needed to stop avoiding the issue. Maybe a romantic dinner with a spectacular view of the city was the way to finally get them (okay, her) to start talking; if nothing else, they'd at least get a good meal out of it. Certainly sounded better than sitting in the room for the rest of the night, uncomfortably staring at the TV or the walls in an effort to ignore the

situation. And then maybe after dinner, she'd finally work up the nerves to sit down and play some poker, either alone or with Tom; he wasn't much for card games.

Allie smiled. Yeah, this was definitely a good plan, and one Tom would more than likely agree to. She knew he really wanted to talk things out, and by making the effort to set up a time and place for doing so, it'd show him she was really starting to take this business between them seriously.

And once they'd figured out whether or not they were going to move on to the next level, then she could go back to plotting how best to get back at him for his unkind remarks about her sexual activities.

"And oh, how you'll pay, Mr Gaines." she muttered, then followed it with an evil little chuckle.

Allie closed the brochure and placed it on the nightstand, then slid down from the pillows to properly lay on the bed. "Night, Grandpa," she whispered in Tom's ear. Then she turned onto her side, away from him, and closed her eyes.

He muttered something in response, but it was nonsensical dream-speak, not conventional English... although it sounded suspiciously like "'Night, Seven."

The dance troupe was in the midst of a complicated routine at the height of *Magipalooza!*'s climactic third act—an erotically charged "battle" between the forces of good and evil—when the panther got loose in the wings.

It wasn't a part of the show, and it took Shawna a second to realize that the night-dark creature padding toward her was off its leash. With other costumed dancers swirling around her onstage and above her on wires, with the orchestrated music pounding in her ears, with her focus on where her feet were supposed to be as she glided through the dance steps, to say she was otherwise preoccupied in hitting her marks, and not looking backstage, would be the understatement of the century. More importantly, however, was the fact that the animal's handler hadn't been immediately aware he was

no longer in control; he'd glanced away just as the chain snapped to take a look at Melina, the statuesque lead nude who played an evil temptress. Like he'd never seen her tits before, the asshole.

The animal drew closer, and Shawna found herself on a collision course with it. It was surreal, in a way, watching the panther get low to the floor as it advanced, preparing to spring, and knowing she'd never be able to get out of its way in time. Knowing that, once it leapt at her, hundreds of pounds of killing machine would come slamming down on her, pinning her to the stage. Knowing that it would tear into her like she was a caribou or a zebra or whatever the hell it was that panthers ate on those *Animal Planet* nature shows.

Thankfully, Andy; one of the dressers who helped Shawna and some of the other girls change costumes between numbers, was a little more focused. Partly because he was gay, and therefore had no interest in staring at Melina's boobs, but mostly because he couldn't stand the woman and the "star" mentality she liked to demonstrate in front of the other dancers. And since he was more concerned with making preparations for the next costume change, his eyes were on activities taking place off the stage, not on it which is why he saw the panther break free. His cry of alarm, unheard by the audience but not by some of the dancers, alerted the stagehands and the other trainers, who sprang into action. The animal was quickly corralled before it got past the edge of the curtain, and taken away without any trouble. Maybe because it was well-trained, and was used to obeying its handlers; maybe because it didn't feel like fighting.

Or maybe it just had other plans. Because Shawna could swear that, as it was led away, the panther looked right at her—*right at her*—and licked its chops, as if to say, "see you around... meat."

By the time she got backstage, Shawna was a nervous wreck. She'd done her best to remain calm and avoid freaking out, the show must go on, after all, but now that she was out of sight of the audience, she was suddenly hit with a really bad case of the shakes. Andy came hurrying over to her while his partner, Eric, worked with the other dressers to help the girls into the vibrantly-colored firebird costumes they wore in the big finale.

"Shawna, come on," Andy prodded. "You have to get ready for the next number."

Shawna shook her head. "I can't," she muttered hoarsely.

He placed a gentle arm around her shoulders, then briskly rubbed his hand up and down her right arm to counteract her chills. "Of course you can. You have to. The show—"

"Don't say it," she cut in, willing her teeth not to chatter. "Please."

"Two minutes!" the stage manager called out. He looked over from his station near the curtain. "She gonna be all right?" he asked Andy.

"She's fine," the dresser assured him. He gave Shawna a comforting squeeze. "Come on, honey, that nasty ole pussy's not here to frighten you anymore—but if we *do* see Dorrie coming back, we'll be sure to give you ample warning."

Shawna laughed, in spite of her shivering. She couldn't help it, given the odd way Andy spoke that always made her giggle: his use of the imperial "we" instead of "I" when referring to himself, like he was British royalty or something. Where he might have picked that up, she hadn't a clue, especially since Andy's roots were in a dairy-farming family in Wisconsin, and she'd never really bothered to ask.

"There you go," Andy said happily, giving her a brief hug. "Now, that's the Shawna we know and love." He winked. "Ready to get back to work?"

"Yeah... I guess so," she replied.

"Good!" He gestured for Eric to come over with her costume. "Because I'm not about to squeeze into that godawful thing and be your stand-in. I don't have the hips for it."

"That's not what I've heard," Shawna said playfully. Andy didn't respond, though; now that he'd talked her down off the ledge, metaphorically, he was all business.

He and Eric moved quickly, detaching Shawna from all the feathers and rhinestones. For about two seconds, she had the wonderful sensation of the terrible weight being lifted from her shoulders, only to have another take its place. She groaned as the firebird costume was hooked on to the harness-like back pack attached to her bra; unlike the battle scene costume, this particular

feather assembly didn't have the benefit of padding, so the wing braces dug heavily into the back of her neck.

"Thirty seconds!" the stage manager bellowed.

Eric placed an intricate headdress, the "flames" of the firebird, on top of the stocking cap Shawna wore over her hair, and tightened the Velcro straps in the back; then he clipped on a few hairpins for good measure. It wouldn't do to have the thing fall off as she danced across the stage.

For the minute that it had taken to go through her clothing switch, Shawna had forgotten all about the panther. But as she prepared to step back out on the stage with the other girls, she caught sight of the cat being led around the stage by Uriel Mayo—the part of the show where his character, Pallen, proved he was Master of All Beasts.

Shawna cautiously moved past the cat, trying to concentrate on her steps. It was difficult, though; she could feel the panther watching her the whole time. At least she *thought* it was watching her. That set all sorts of warning bells off in her head. What if the cat, even now, was straining to reach her, trying to break another leash so it could pick up where it had left off? Shawna wished she could turn around to find out, but she had to keep moving, had to finish the routine. The show must go on, after all. And it would go on, somehow, somehow, even if one of its entertainers got turned into Hamburger Helper in some bizarre mishap.

Ah, showbiz.

God, Shawna thought miserably, sometimes I really hate—

"—this fuckin' job," Warren said as he gripped the steering wheel. He let his skull drop back against the padded headrest, and released a disgusted sigh through clenched teeth.

He and Izzy had spent the balance of the day visiting Roberto Diaz's usual haunts, but the only ghosts they found either denied knowing who Diaz was; an especially annoying circumstance when one of the people they interviewed was their suspect's cousin, or were

nowhere to be found; probably off scaring the clientele at a liquor store or a crackhouse, just for a change of pace.

Homicide had issued a press release to the media around three o'clock, asking the public for any information that could lead them to the elusive Roberto Diaz, and stressing that the man was merely "a person of interest" to them. In Homeland Security terminology by practically post-9/11 America, the phrase, appropriated from every law enforcement agency in the country, was meant to convey Metro's belief that they considered Diaz a possible witness to Danny Lavirra's killing, and not the actual murderer. As far as Warren was concerned, it just meant they didn't want to spook the son of a bitch and have him hightail it out of the city, if he hadn't already. With every passing hour, however, the trail was growing colder, and the chance Diaz might have set off for the California border was becoming a very real prospect.

The traffic light changed, and Warren turned the car around the corner of Stewart Avenue and into the parking area outside Downtown Area Command. He killed the engine, and let his hands fall into his lap.

In the passenger seat beside him, Izzy closed her notepad and tucked it away in the inside breast pocket of her blazer. "So... still thinking about retirement?"

He turned a mirthless smile in her direction. "After today? Oh, yeah." He paused, letting the smile fade. "But not until we've cleared this one."

Izzy nodded, apparently pleased with his answer. "Still think Diaz is in the city?"

"God, I hope so," Warren replied, then shrugged. "But I'm starting to doubt it, y'know? I'm really starting to doubt it."

"Well, we know he isn't using that busted-up, piece-of-shit Firebird he owns to get anywhere," Izzy pointed out. "Not after those two uniforms found it over by the Econo Lodge on Charleston." The report on that had come in around seven o'clock, but a quick sweep of the hotel by a handful of other officers led by Warren and Isabelle had turned up nothing.

"Yeah," Warren admitted, "but Diaz could've doubled back to the bus station, or boosted another ride."

"Or he could still be somewhere in the vicinity," Izzy said with a knowing smile. There was a sort of cheerleader-at-a-pep-rally tone in her voice. She probably put it on in an attempt to bolster her partner's confidence, but it was going to take a lot more than a cheery voice and a good thought to accomplish that. The look on his face apparently made that clear to her, because her smile reversed direction. "What? It's within the realm of possibility, isn't it?" she asked.

He thought about it for a second, then nodded. "Yeah. I guess. Doesn't make it so, though."

"Man, you really *do* hate the job, don't you?" Izzy said. She sounded surprised. "I thought maybe you were just going through a phase or something—y'know, like we all go through at some point. I figured you'd get over it by the end of the day," she leaned across the seat to stare deep into his eyes, "but I can see now that ain't gonna happen." She sat back, and shook her head. "You're way past depression; you're really burned out."

"To a fuckin' crisp," Warren agreed. He opened his door to step out of the car. "But that doesn't mean I'm not gonna do my job and put away the sick fuck who killed that kid before I call it quits. And if it turns out Diaz is the one who did it, or he's helping whoever *did* do it get outta town, I'm gonna bury my foot so far up his ass when I find him, the EMTs will think he ate a size-eleven for lunch."

A stern look darkened Isabelle's features. "I didn't hear that, Warren," she said. "He's a suspect. You don't get to beat the shit out of suspects just 'cause they piss you off." She pointed a warning finger at him. "You try using excessive force on Diaz when we locate him, without clear provocation, and the press will have a field day. And I'll have to admit to Internal Affairs that we had this conversation."

He tried to give her a friendly, thanks-for-the-reminder smile, but his facial muscles wound up turning it into a smirk. "You take all the fun outta police work, you know that?" He pulled himself out of the car and slammed the door before she could reply.

As Warren headed across the parking lot toward his own car: a black, 1994 Dodge Intrepid, whose dings and dents and scratched paint job showed its ten-plus years of service. Izzy got out of the plainclothes unit and walked up to join him. "You heading over to the Tower?" she asked.

Warren looked at his watch; it was just past nine o'clock. "Not just yet; Shawna doesn't get off work till eleven. Figured I'd head home, take a quick shower, and change. Why? You wanna grab a beer or something?"

"Maybe tomorrow," she replied. "No, I was just asking."

He stopped beside the driver's side of the Intrepid, paused a moment, then turned around to look at her suspiciously. "Oh, I get it. You think I'm so fed up with the job that maybe I'll go home and eat my gun?" He grinned.

She shook her head. "No, you're not that stupid. And as long as you've got a woman like Shawna in your life, you're not about to throw that away just because you're starting to hate what you do." She waved her hands, gesturing at the world in general. "Christ, if everybody who hated their job felt like killing themselves, you could probably fill up the Grand Canyon with the bodies."

"Then why the interest?" Warren asked.

"Because I want to know if you're going to tell Shawna how you feel," Izzy replied. "It's one thing to pour your heart out to your partner—"

"Is that what I was doing?" Warren quipped. "Guess I gotta stop watchin' *Oprah* when I'm off-duty. It's makin' me too chatty."

"But," Izzy continued, adopting a stern tone, "I'm not your girlfriend, and *she's* the one you really ought to be telling your problems to." She gently placed a hand on his arm. "You know I'm always willing to listen, 'ren, but it's not fair to Shawna if you keep shutting her out."

He shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other, and scratched the back of his neck. "Yeah, know, but I just don't like burdening her with that shit."

"Shawna's a big girl, Warren," Izzy replied. "She knows the world is sometimes a scary place. She used to dance at this end of town,

remember? I think she can handle whatever you tell her. I think she *wants* to handle whatever you tell her—if you'll give her the chance." She smiled. "It's not like you're going to quote her chapter-and-verse from ME reports, right? Even *I* wouldn't tell that stuff to Charlie." She gave his arm a small squeeze. "Think about it, okay? It's not like she's asking you to marry her; she just wants to be part of the other half of your life, even as bad as it can be."

Warren slowly nodded. "Okay." He smiled. "Thanks, Oprah. I'll let you know how it turns out."

"Just talk to her, 'ren; it'll do both of you a world of good." Izzy grinned and lightly punched him on the shoulder. "I'll see you tomorrow." She turned and began walking toward her SUV on the far side of the lot.

"Tell Charlie I said, 'Hi,'" Warren called after her.

She looked back as she kept walking. "I'll be sure to give him a big kiss for you."

Warren held up a warning finger. "Just on the cheek," he joked. "And tell him it doesn't mean anything—not unless he wants to buy me dinner."

Izzy laughed and waved goodbye, then headed off to her vehicle.

Warren climbed inside the Intrepid and keyed the engine. He spared a glance in the rearview mirror to see Izzy get into the SUV, just to make sure she wasn't watching to see if he really *was* contemplating suicide, then drove out of the lot. It was nice and all that Izzy was so concerned about his wellbeing, but she didn't need to worry. After all, she was right about Shawna and him: with her in his life, he had too much to live for. With all the shit he had to wade through on a daily basis, she was the one thing he had to look forward to when his shift was over.

Eat his gun? No fuckin' way. He'd sooner quit the force and whore himself out at the Chicken Ranch than blow his brains out. No, he had better things to do with his time, like maybe taking Shawna out to a late dinner tonight and finally opening up to her.

Scratch that, he thought; there were no maybes about it. Izzy was right about that, too: Shawna could make her own choices. If she

didn't want to hear about the crap he had to deal with, that was fine. But it would have to be *her* decision.

Warren smiled. It was the oddest sensation, but it felt like a weight was starting to lift from his shoulders. All this time keeping Shawna at arm's length when it came to his work, mistakenly trying to protect a grown, intelligent woman from the darkness of the world he inhabited. It seemed so incredibly stupid on his part—well-intentioned, but nonetheless stupid. Now that Izzy had made him take a step back, he was able to get a good look at the big picture... and realize that maybe all this time he *had* been a selfish fuck", as his partner had so eloquently put it this afternoon.

Well, all of that's gonna change, he promised himself. After tonight, the bond between him and Shawna was going to be different, was going to be stronger. A fresh start, a new direction to their relationship, from which they'd share equally in the good times as well as the bad. No holding back, no secrets, no bullshitting.

Yes, indeed, tonight was going to be the night when he finally set things right, Warren thought with a broad smile. A regular "night to remember", guaranteed to change their lives forever.

NINE

"Get enough sleep there, Grandpa?" Allie asked, and smiled broadly.

A hint of blush colored Tom's cheeks, and he shrugged. "Yeah... I guess. Didn't think I was getting so old already I'd start dozing off in the middle of the day."

Allie raised an eyebrow. "Dozing? You were out for, like, four hours."

Again, a shrug. "Yeah, okay, but all that walking can really wipe you out, y'know? This isn't the kinda town made for getting around on foot." He wagged his index finger at her. "Besides, who was it I found sacked out next to me when I woke up?"

"Jude Law," she quipped, then paused. "Oh, no, wait. That's *my* fantasy. Yours is the one with girls wearing tin foil." She did a little wave of her hand to cut him off before he could protest. "Anyway, I'm entitled to my beauty sleep. That's what keeps me looking so fresh and girly." She gave him a wide-eyed grin.

"Girly, huh?" Tom said wryly. "Don't know what's so girly about snoring."

"That's 'cause you're not a girly," Allie replied, still grinning.

A little smile pulled at the left corner of Tom's mouth. "Well, I do like to think of myself as a lesbian trapped in a man's body," he said quietly.

"Umm... ick," Allie said, sticking out her tongue in distaste.

"Hey, don't knock it till you've tried it, sister," Tom answered.

Allie frowned. "Do you ever want to get laid again?"

"By you?" he asked. "Or just in general?"

"Yes, by me," she answered, a little snappishly. "Yes," Tom said slowly. It was clear he didn't know where this was going.

"Then don't ever bring that up again," she warned. "I have enough problems in my life, all right? I don't need to add to them with a mental image of getting screwed by a hermaphrodite every time we're doing it, thank you very much." She tapped the sides of her

head with her knuckles, and groaned slightly. "See? Now it's stuck in there."

"Best of both worlds, y'know," Tom said offhandedly. "Uh... from what I've heard," he added quickly.

"Knock. It. Off," Allie said sternly, emphasizing each word. "Or the only world you're gonna get to know for the rest of this trip is one of extreme sexual loneliness."

He waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. "Pfft. Been there, done that. That's why God gave us two hands and an imagination. And loads of Internet porn."

Allie gnashed her teeth in frustration, but Tom only smiled in response.

"Eat," he said pleasantly. "Your food's getting cold."

Allie looked down at her plate. She'd ordered the Sweet Potato Catfish with Andouille Cream Drizzle, a Creole dish served on a bed of spinach. Like most food associated with New Orleans, it was heavy on the spices; the sauce even had a slight flavor of bourbon. Her tongue had started burning and her eyes started watering after the first two bites, but the beer she was having with it (a Kingfisher, brewed in India—not her normal Budweiser or Rolling Rock, but why not try something different in a fancy restaurant?) did wonders for cooling down the initial sting.

She wasn't as much in the mood to eat as she had been when they were taking the elevator up to The Lady of the Lake.

It didn't seem to have affected Tom, though. He'd ordered the Poached Salmon with Dilled Sour Cream, and gone back to tearing into it—and the fresh-baked miniature dinner rolls that came with every meal with a great deal of gusto. He'd take a few large bites, then wash it down with gulps of his typical drink of choice: a Corona, served in a tall glass. A small touch of gentility to ensure the clientele knew they were eating in a *restaurant*, and not some greasy hamburger joint in a shopping mall.

Allie turned her attention away from the food to look around at The Lady of the Lake. Even at one o'clock in the morning, it was fairly packed; she and Tom had had to wait fifteen minutes for a table to free up when they'd first arrived. A lot of it probably had to

do with the night time view—from there, you could see the entire city, and well beyond. And since the restaurant was the highest point in town, the "light pollution", that glaring by-product of artificial lighting, which obscured the majority of the stars filling the sky, and found in major cities like Vegas, wasn't even a factor. With the neon signs of the Strip so far below, and the restaurant's lighting kept to a dim, romantic level, to Allie it was as though the Lady was floating in space, the stars around it were in such abundance.

A few tables away, she spotted a couple huddled close together. She might have considered them father and daughter; the guy certainly looked old enough, but from the way they were holding hands, it was pretty clear they were anything but... although in this town, anything was possible. It *was* called Sin City, right? The girl, a brunette, with the kind of figure Allie hated, because women like that never gained an ounce of fat, no matter what they ate, looked a little shaken, like something traumatic had happened. Maybe he was breaking up with her? Allie didn't think that all too surprising: she'd had her share of romantically set, expensive meals in her time, a majority of which ended with the jerk muttering how they should "maybe see other people," and her getting stuck with the check as a going-away present. A little something to remember him by when her Visa bill came in at the end of the month.

This guy appeared to be no different. His body language, from the way he sat hunched over in his chair, to the awkward way he grasped her hands, screamed "tough guy" to Allie, and tough guys usually weren't that romantic; she could attest to that fact, too. And with someone who looked that tough, in a town like Las Vegas... well, the first thing that came to Allie's mind was that the guy was probably a mobster. Didn't the Mafia run all the casinos, she wondered? She'd heard that somewhere once, maybe in a movie? No, more likely in one of those documentaries about the town she'd caught on *A&E*—or was it the *History Channel*?

Whatever. The guy looked like a thug, right down to his cheap suit (weren't mobsters supposed to dress better than in off-the-rack shit?), and no doubt he was telling the girl how it was really better for both of them if they called it quits. Translation: he was already

screwing somebody else, and was looking to discard his old toy in as public a setting as possible so she wouldn't make a scene.

Or he just needed a roomful of witnesses who could attest to his gentlemanly behavior tonight if she ever turned up missing.

Allie shuddered slightly at the thought, and turned her gaze elsewhere. She focused on the décor of the restaurant, admiring the fact that it was so tasteful and glamorous and... quiet, as opposed to the blaringly gaudy, in-your-face King Arthur motif created by the designers of the hotel/casino directly beneath her feet. Up here, there were no serving wenches wearing corsets that pushed out their boobs, no strolling minstrels with jingly bell-caps trying to interrupt your meal with lame songs about brave knights dining with their virtuous maidens (that was a laugh, on both counts!), no prerecorded, tinny Renaissance festival music croaking out of speakers set in the ceiling. No, The Lady of the Lake, despite its Arthurian name, was a real restaurant: good food (if a little pricey), well-dressed serving staff, and a three-piece jazz band, pianist, guitarist, and drummer, quietly performing some old standards. Yes, just as the hotel brochure had promised, it truly was a perfect setting for a romantic dinner for two.

Or the perfect place to finally sit down and get to the business at hand.

"So, this marriage thing," she began slowly as she turned back to face Tom.

"Yes?" She noticed how his shoulders tensed, like he was waiting for the proverbial hammer to fall. The expression on his face, however, told a different story: he'd been waiting for her to start the discussion, and now was grateful she had. That was so typically Tom—not wanting to be the first to bring up bad news, usually waiting for the other person to do it. In a way, it was sort of amusing: the Great Avoider counting on the Queen of Procrastination to open the floor for debate.

"Well..." She glanced away, to stare down at her food. As it cooled, the sweet potato-encrusted catfish, lying there in its red-tinged sauce, was starting to look like a hardening scab, the spinach underneath it a little like green pus oozing out from its edges. The

sight of it immediately made Allie turn her attention back to Tom. "So, how's this first day been? It working out for you? Getting used to the whole husband angle?"

"Sure," he replied. His eyes narrowed in suspicion. "How come you're asking? Having second thoughts?"

Third or fourth thoughts, actually, Allie considered. But she had also come to realize that the pressure she'd been feeling when she woke up, the little voice in her head that screamed, "how could you be so fuckin' stupid as to get married to your *ex-boyfriend*, of all people, you dumbass?" had begun to ease as the day progressed. Could be because of that old woman, Ethel, telling them off this morning in the lobby about how they needed to make the most of it if they wanted the marriage to work. It had in Allie's case. Okay, so maybe playing tourist and going on a shopping spree for souvenirs wasn't exactly making the most of it, but it had been a start, right?

Baby steps; that's what they'd been taking. Slow, careful steps to make sure neither of them fell flat on their face, or went banging their head on the unpadded corners of the psychological furniture around them.

"What? You're rethinking it right now?" Tom asked, disrupting her little digression.

Allie shook her head. "No, I just wanted to make sure *you* weren't."

His face contorted, as though in a brief show of pain, and then it became *his* turn to stare at his plate. "Well, I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about it," he muttered.

Allie's eyebrows rose. An admission like that was a big step for Tom—the kind of thing he never would have done back when they were dating. In those days, he would have taken the macho guy approach and tried bullshitting her about how he'd never doubted their decision for a minute. That he was hitting her with the truth so early into this marriage was a bigger shock than the knowledge he'd been reconsidering their situation.

But not almost as big a shock as the realization that now *she* was the one doing the bullshitting. Holy role reversals, Batman, she thought.

He looked up at her. "Big surprise, huh? I mean, me coming right out and admitting it."

She nodded lamely. "Well... yeah, you could say that."

He smiled. "You think maybe being a married man is gettin' me to open up? Get in touch with my feelings and shit like that?"

"Well, when you put it that way," Allie replied wryly, "maybe not so much. But I have to admit it's a start."

Tom nodded, like he was pleased with her answer... and with himself. Maybe he and his ego would like to be alone, she thought. She used her napkin to hide the smile now pulling at her lips.

"What about you?" he asked.

Inwardly, she grimaced. She really should have seen this one coming. "What about me what?" she asked coyly.

"You know," he replied. "Getting used to the wife thing yet?"

She took a sip of Kingfisher to stall for time while she formulated an answer. "It's not so bad," she finally said. "But we're only starting out. We've still got a couple of days left to see what happens." She put down her glass and leaned forward to put her hand over his. "I mean, this is a big, lifechanging thing we're doing, Tom. If we're really going to commit to the whole man-and-wife, till death do us part gig, we've gotta be sure it's the right thing for us. We're talking about the rest of our lives, after all. You understand that, right?"

He nodded somberly, but he didn't look as upset about her point of view as he had been that morning. Like he'd resigned himself to the way events would ultimately play out, no matter how unpleasant that might be for the both of them. But, really, who said they *had* to turn out badly.

"So, what do you want to do on this improvised honeymoon?" she asked. "Want to take that ride out to Barstow tomorrow?" She paused for dramatic effect. "And then maybe we'll check out that *Star Trek* show after dinner, if we're not too wiped out from the driving."

He was like a little kid, his eyes got so big and bright. "For real?"

"For real. But you can do most of the driving," she replied. "I'll play navigator, 'cause you know how much you suck when it comes to reading maps."

He cocked his head to one side, looking idiotically confused. "Why do we need a map to drive to Barstow? I thought you said it was just over the border."

"Uh-huh. And the exact location of that border would be... where?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Beats me. I've never been to California, remember?"

"Yeah, I know. And we need a map because you "a have that..." she grasped his hand and pulled him toward her, "...that affliction," she whispered.

The look of confusion turned to one of annoyance. "What affliction?"

"You know the one," she replied hoarsely. "It's called 'narcissus mapulitis', a terrifying fear of asking for directions because you're afraid of bruising your male ego." She patted his hand, grinned, and sat back. "Don't feel like you're alone, honey. According to a study I saw in *Time* magazine, just about every guy suffers from it at some point in their life. But I hear they're working on a cure."

"Smartass," he mumbled good-naturedly.

"And getting smarter every day," she replied. "I read a lot, y'know—and I'm not talking just about the comic strips in the newspapers."

"Uh-huh," Tom said, and picked up his glass of corona. "And you're telling me this, why?"

"Well, I didn't want you thinking you were getting some kind of trophy wife as part of the deal," she replied with a smile. "I might be a hot-looking chick and all, but there's a brain under all this hair—and I'm not afraid to use it."

"You've never been afraid to use it before," he countered. "Why start now?" He winked, then took a swig of beer. A whimsical little smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as he swallowed. "Besides," he added in what sounded like a sincere tone, "I wouldn't have you act any other way."

She chuckled. "Oh, you're a smooth talker when you wanna be, Tom Gaines, you know that?"

"Only 'cause I wanna get laid tonight," he replied with a broad grin.

"Well, that'd be up to me, now, wouldn't it?" Allie asserted with a sly smile. "Maybe the 'machine" would like a night off."

His face went three shades of red in the space of a heartbeat. "Oh, shit," he croaked out.

The sly smile on Allie's face morphed into a Cheshire Cat-like grin. Let's see how smooth a talker he is now, she thought with some measure of sadistic glee.

One thing was for certain: she wasn't going to get stuck with the bill for *this* meal.

Sitting at the elegant, smoke-dark oak bar at the other side of the dining area, Arlen Ploog looked at the bill in front of him and wondered just what had possessed him to have dinner in such a fancy restaurant. Normally, he'd be seated at one of the banquet tables at the Tower's downstairs buffet, but he'd suddenly got it in his head to take a detour up to the top of the world, as it were. Maybe he was in a mood to see how the other half lived. Maybe he was in a mood to celebrate coming out a winner against the Grim Reaper this afternoon at the laundromat, when that human wrecking machine had decided not to pound him into dust. Or maybe he was just sick of the cheap steak and instant mashed potatoes the common folk (like him) were served at The Round Table in exchange for all the cash they poured into the casino.

Motivations aside, he had to admit the place was awfully nice; just sitting here made him feel like a big shot. Still, in this town, the chance to feel important often came with a hefty price, and The Lady of the Lake was not an eatery for the faint of wallet. That's why Arlen had almost choked on his apple martini when the bartender slid the bill in front of him.

Forty bucks for three drinks? Twenty-five for a bowl of New England-style clam chowder? Sure, the clams might be fresh, and they served it with those little oyster-shaped crackers, but Jesus, that was some expensive soup! What'd they do-fly to Boston to catch the little fuckers themselves, then ship them cross-country?

Arlen sighed quietly. It looked like he'd be stopping off at the supermarket on his way home later, to stock up on more Ramen noodles. Between this dinner and the run he'd be making at the poker tables in a little while, he'd be eating them for the next few weeks after the battering his bank account was about to take.

Well, try an' look on the bright side, he told himself. At least you did this *before* you started playing cards, so you actually have some dough to pay for it. And it's a good thing, too. From the way the manager was givin' you the hard stare when you walked in, odds are six, two an' even he'd call in some of his boys if you came up light. Fuckin' mobsters.

"Will there be anything else?" the bartender asked. She was a bottle redhead—no natural hair color he knew of ever came in that kind of fire engine hue—with a face like a porn star and a chest to match; the white blouse and tight black vest she wore over it helped accentuate her curves. It was a far cry from the grizzled oldtimers working the counters downtown, with their bulbous red noses lit up like Rudolph himself, and their beer guts flowing over their belt buckles like yeast rising out of a baking pan. But that was all a part of the appeal of the Tower's snazzy restaurant: not only were the people who ate here beautiful, but so were the folks who served them.

This one had introduced herself as Lea when he took a seat at the bar (the only place in the restaurant for singles like him *to* sit), but dealing with her was strictly on a business level; he could tell that right off the bat. Unlike the bartenders downtown, who at least pretended to care when you started telling them your troubles (if only to keep you drinking) Lea was apparently not the least bit interested in hearing them... if he'd been so inclined to start pouring out his heart to a perfect stranger. She'd put a menu in front of him, told him to let her know when he was ready to order, and moved off to take care of another customer. A better-looking male customer, Arlen noticed. Yeah, well, like *that* was a big surprise.

Now she was back at the end of his meal, showing him only as much interest as her job required. Probably wanted him to hurry up and get the hell away from her bar, so some male model-type could have a seat. Just pay the bill and get out, her expression seemed to

say. You're lowering our level of fashionability every second your ass is on that stool.

Well, screw that, he thought. He was the customer, wasn't he? He'd be the one who decided when he was ready to leave. "You know what? Yeah," Arlen replied. "I'll have a coffee."

There was a momentary flash of heat in those baby blue eyes. Was she wearing colored contacts? "Latte, cappuccino, espresso?"

"Just a regular coffee," Arlen said, putting on his sweetest smile. "Black. No sugar."

She picked up the bill, a small frown dimpling her cheeks. Not too deeply, he noticed; she probably got some kind of Botox injection during the week to smooth out her laugh lines. "Be up in a minute," she muttered, then walked away.

"Thanks," he said pleasantly. If she heard him, she didn't acknowledge it.

Arlen leaned back in the high-backed stool, feeling like he'd made some small victory in the eternal class war between the average Joe and the—what did the tabloids call them?—*fashionistas*. A fancy word for a high-priced shithead, but then this town was all about labels; nobody just called a spade a spade anymore. Well, he'd get his shots in where he could, even if it meant giving a snooty bartender a little grief. It wasn't as though he expected to ever set foot in the joint again; his wallet wouldn't be able to take another hit like this.

He looked over his shoulder to scope out the rest of the place. From what he could see, the crowd was a mix of trendy young hipsters with their dates, and folks in their forties and fifties. There were a few senior citizens scattered around, more than likely just to show the restaurant didn't discriminate against AARP members. Arlen wondered how much *they* lowered the level of fashionability; probably not too much, since they were tucked away in one of the darker spots, away from the windows. Like anyone from the street could see up one hundred and twenty stories and go, "Old people? Shit, we're not eating up there!"

There was a loud clink of china behind him, and Arlen turned back around. Lea had returned, and none too quietly placed a cup of coffee on the counter in front of him. She stood there silently, leaning

against the bar with both hands, like she was waiting for him to ask for the dessert menu and prolong her misery.

"Thanks, sweetheart," Arlen said with his friendliest smile. "You're a real pal."

She rolled her eyes and grunted in disgust, then slapped the revised bill on the bar. "Let me know when you're ready to pay," she said, and walked off.

Arlen picked up the cup with both hands, and held it under his nose. The aroma was incredible; he could swear there was the slightest hint of chocolate in the brew. This sure as hell wasn't some store-bought instant crap; this was the good stuff. He took a sip and swished it around in his mouth for a couple of seconds, savoring the taste. As he glanced down at the bill, he realized he *had* to enjoy it while it lasted: at five dollars a cup, he wouldn't be drinking any more of it in *this* lifetime.

He took another sip, and closed his eyes. Yeah, there was chocolate in there, all right, just enough to cut down some of the beans' bitter taste. Throwing in milk and sugar would have killed the flavor and the caffeine buzz he was going to need when he dropped by the poker tables in a few minutes.

Arlen opened his eyes and placed the cup back on its saucer. Just to his right was one of the big picture windows, and through it he could see the south end of Las Vegas Boulevard, where all the big casinos were laid out like gaudy souvenirs from a giant's trip around the world. A bit of France, a bit of New York, a taste of Egypt, a couple pirate ships, even a volcano. All it needed was a big dome covering everything, and a bunch of fake plastic snow to swirl around.

And then he caught sight of his reflection on the glass, like he'd been superimposed over the image of this neon-lit testament to wealth and excess. Like he was the guy who owned this town, who called the shots, who had every high-priced roller, every showgirl, every big-name star who blew in from LA begging for his attention.

"Top o' the world, Ma," he said softly as he saluted the mirror Ploog. "Top o' the world."

Of course, things hadn't worked out too well for Jimmy Cagney when he'd screamed out those words in that Forties gangster movie *White Heat*—didn't the building he was in blow up just after he said them?—but it somehow seemed appropriate. Shit, it wasn't as if Arlen was about to throw his arms up over his head and start yelling, "I'm king of the world!" What was that supposed to mean, anyway? The boat sank and the poor bastard drowned at the end of the movie, didn't he? That wasn't going out in style; that wasn't being on top of your game. But Cagney buying the farm in an exploding chemical plant? That was *all* style, baby... even if he *was* playing a psycho killer.

So, yeah, for one night at least, Arlen Ploog was on top of the world. It was a feeling that wouldn't last for very long, not once he got back on the elevator to head down to the lobby. But for the time being, he was going to drink his coffee and admire the view, and the *fashionistas* could go screw, for all he cared.

What was the point in rushing, anyway? The casino would still be there when he left the restaurant, the dealers would still be ready to take his money whenever he showed up, and the Great Glass Elevator would still come all the way up here to get him when he pressed the call button. To paraphrase his mother, when he was living back home in New Jersey and had to grab the PATH train every day to go into Manhattan, "There'll always be another elevator. You don't have to kill yourself racing to catch the first one."

In elevators as in subway trains, it was sound advice, even twenty years later. Arlen nodded in agreement with that bit of logic, and took another sip of coffee.

"How's your coffee?" Warren asked.

"Okay," Shawna replied. Her voice was suppressed, not its usual bubbly tone. She'd spent the last half-hour telling him about her ordeal with the panther, and had come close to breaking down in tears a number of times before she got the whole story out. It was clear how terrified she'd been, and watching her trembling and

acting so withdrawn hours later only made him want to put a bullet in the animal's head so it could never scare her again.

It was an awkward situation for them both to be in, given where they were, but Shawna had insisted on coming up to the restaurant anyway. She'd wanted this to be a special night for them, she'd explained; unfortunately, it had wound up being a memorable one for all the wrong reasons. Warren might not have minded it so much, if it weren't for the brunette a few tables away giving him the evil eye, like he was some kind of wifebeater... or cradle-robber. What was he supposed to do—tell Shawna to stop crying because somebody was watching? The hell *that* was gonna happen.

He considered either flipping the woman the bird or walking over and strongly advising her to fuck off and mind her own business, but he didn't need the hostility that would come with it. Having the lead investigator in a child's homicide get into a public argument with some nosy chick and her husband (he'd spotted the glint of their gold rings in the candlelight) wouldn't exactly make him the poster-boy for Las Vegas tourism. Or make him too popular in the Mayor's office when the press got ahold of it. The best thing was to do nothing at all. Let the bitch stare all she wanted; it'd give her something to tell her friends when she got back home to Hog Walla or Skellsville or whatever town it was she and hubby came from. He had more important matters on which to focus, like seeing his girlfriend through this major crisis.

"You want any dessert?" he asked. A stupid question, perhaps, but he was grasping at straws here, just trying to make conversation. Better to distract her with dumb shit than let her sit quietly, replaying the incident over and over in her head.

Shawna shook her head, then drank the rest of the coffee and put the empty cup on its saucer.

"More coffee?"

"No thanks." She drifted off into silence again, staring at the brownish stains at the bottom of the cup.

"Want me to go downstairs and shoot the son of a bitch?"

She looked up, startled.

Warren smiled warmly. "Just making sure you're still with me. It gets kinda lonely around here when you go wandering off like that."

It was the sort of overly romantic comment he normally avoided making. It always sounded like so much saccharine-laced bullshit when he'd tried them in prior relationships, but he felt comfortable doing it around Shawna. She didn't laugh when he said something like that, didn't roll her eyes and dismiss it out of hand; she knew how heartfelt the sentiment was. And besides, he actually meant it. It wasn't like twenty years ago, when he used to toss out false sentiments like confetti, in the hopes of getting under some girl's skirt; time, and maturity, had eventually put a stop to that nonsense. Of course, if the guys in the squad room ever heard him right now, there'd be no end to the good-natured ribbing they'd hand out.

"Sorry," Shawna replied. "I didn't mean to be such a killjoy." But at least there was a trace of a smile to go with her apology. At least he'd finally managed to break down that barrier she'd erected around herself. She wasn't a cop, after all; she wasn't used to closing herself down emotionally, nor should she be.

"Don't worry about it," Warren said. "We'll do it again some other night. How about I just grab the check and give you a ride home?" He shifted around in his seat so he could retrieve his wallet from the back pocket on the right side of his trousers.

"Oh, you don't have to do that," Shawna replied.

He stopped in mid-gesture. "What, pay for dinner?" He smiled. "Okay."

"Jackass." The barrier cracked in half; he could see it in her eyes. The smile broadened. "I meant driving me home. My car's downstairs, in the garage."

He shrugged and pulled out the wallet. "So's mine."

"Yeah, but if you take me home, what am I gonna do in the morning to get around? It's my day off. I have a lot of errands to run, and I can't do them without a car."

He grinned wolfishly. "Who said I was taking you to *your* place?"

The smile faltered. "Oh, Warren, I'm not really in the mood."

He reached across the table to take her hand. "So, who's asking? I just don't think you should be alone tonight."

"Or out on the road in my current state of mind?" she asked.

"Maybe that, too," he conceded. "Not after that shit you went through. 'Friends don't let friends drive distracted, 'y'know."

"I thought that was 'drive drunk'," she said.

"Same thing," he replied. "Besides, most drivers don't have to put up with working in Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom every day." He sat up straight in his chair and tried to look official. "Either way, ma'am, as a duly deputized member of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, I'll have to ask you to remain in town for the night so you don't potentially become a risk to yourself or other drivers."

"And if I refuse?" she asked with a tiny grin. Some of the old Shawna was rising to the surface; he could tell by the playful tone creeping into her voice. "You gonna cuff me, officer?"

"Detective," he corrected her. "And that'd be entirely up to you."

"My choice?" she murmured. "Well, *that* would be different."

Warren laughed, and looked up in time to catch their waiter's eye as he walked past. Warren put up his hand, as though holding a pen, and made the universal signal to ask for the dinner check. The waiter nodded and moved off to retrieve it. Warren looked back to Shawna.

"Well, this night could've gone better," she commented.

He shrugged. "Hey, you're entitled to get depressed after what happened."

She nodded glumly. "I know, but I really wanted a chance for the two of us to talk." She looked up at him. "Was there anything *you* wanted to talk about?"

He hesitated. Sure, he thought, there were a million things he'd wanted to discuss. Leaving the job, his latest case, where this relationship might ultimately be heading; all good topics, but he just couldn't bring himself to broach any of them. Not right now. He'd been prepared to, right from the moment he'd said good night to Isabelle in the LVPD parking lot, but when he'd seen how distraught Shawna was after he'd arrived at the Tower, all those subjects were quickly pushed into the back of his mind. His problems meant nothing in comparison to hers, especially when she so badly needed

his help in getting through this crisis. They could wait for another day.

He shook his head. "Nah. Nothing important."

She looked at him closely, like she could tell he was hiding something. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely," he assured her. "Nothing we can't talk about some other time."

Shawna didn't appear to believe him; the frown tugging at the corners of her mouth was evidence of that, but all she did was shrug. "Okay."

The waiter arrived with the check and a handful of complimentary chocolate mint wafers, then told them he'd come back for the payment when they were ready. Warren thanked him, and the man moved off.

As he glanced over the bill and tried to figure out what the hell the waiter's fifteen-percent tip came out to, based on the three-figure sum at the bottom of the paper, Warren glanced over at Shawna. She was starting to withdraw again; he could tell because she hadn't made an immediate play to snatch up all the mints. He frowned. Maybe he *should* go downstairs and shoot that fucking animal. It'd certainly give *him* some peace of mind.

Warren scratched his jaw as he thought of what they could do next, to cut through her depression. There had to be *something* they could get involved in to take her mind off that goddamn panther.

TEN

"Man, that fish was good," Tom said, and patted his stomach. "A little expensive, but I guess you gotta live a little every now and then, huh?"

Allie shrugged. "It was all right." After her catfish had started looking like an open wound, she hadn't been able to do more than pick at it with her fork. Right up until the waiter came over to clear the table, she'd been wondering if maybe she should have ordered something she could tolerate, like fish sticks or a fillet of sole. "The chocolate mousse was nice. A little on the heavy side for me, though."

"Oh, I'm sure we can figure out some way to burn off all those calories." Tom gave her a sidelong glance and wiggled his eyebrows.

Allie snorted. "And you call *me* unstoppable."

He smiled. "What? Exercise is supposed to be good for you, especially after a big meal."

She hadn't asked him how much their feast had cost. Tom had snatched up the bill before she could see it, but she knew it hadn't been cheap. Hell, the least expensive appetizer on the menu was fifteen dollars. And on a carpenter's salary, Tom wasn't exactly the richest guy in the world. But he'd insisted on paying for the whole thing, instead of them splitting it; one of those "husbandly duties" he'd quickly taken to handling, she imagined. Well, maybe she'd spring for the *Star Trek* tickets when they eventually went on the ride, as a small way of paying him back.

Maybe she was kinda in the mood for a late night session. It wasn't like she had any plans to visit the hotel's fitness club at this time of night to work off the chocolate mousse, right? And besides, it was supposed to be a honeymoon of sorts now, wasn't it? Wouldn't be much of one if they didn't give housekeeping something to tidy up in the morning...

"Beautiful night, huh?" Tom asked.

Allie looked past him. They were standing in the south vestibule, waiting for the elevator with a large group of people who were all heading out from the restaurant. She and Tom had gotten there first,

so they were right by the doors. And through the floor-to-ceiling windows that rose along both sides of the elevator, she could see the full moon, shining brightly high above the neon lights of the Strip.

It was a beautiful night, and a complete turnaround from the horrendous morning they'd had. From battling bedmates to happy newlyweds, all in the space of one day. Allie smiled wistfully. It was hard to believe, but true; harder still to make it work over time, she knew. But they'd try.

As she turned toward her husband, Allie caught sight of something that instantly wiped the smile from her face. Reflected in the window, standing just a few feet away in the crowd, was the fortysomething thug she'd been keeping an eye on during dinner. His lady friend had stopped crying, maybe because her "sugar daddy" had promised to buy her something nice, and they each had an arm around the other's waist. As she watched the girl laugh at something the guy said, Allie began to wonder if maybe she'd been wrong about him; maybe he wasn't as bad as she'd made him out to be. The girl didn't look like she was afraid of him, and there was something about the way he looked at her that made it apparent he cared for her.

It was more than a little possible, Allie had to admit, that she was jumping to conclusions. After all, it wasn't as if she knew the couple. It could just be she'd misunderstood why the girl had been crying.

Maybe. But he was still old enough to be her father, though. And that still made him a little creepy.

It didn't mean he couldn't be an annoying little asshole, however. Because as she stared at the couple's reflection, Allie realized that the guy was looking back at *her*. He knew she was watching them, and that was probably why he put on a huge, shit-eating grin. And then he gave her a little salute.

The smug son of a bitch.

The warning bell of the arriving elevator sounded just as she gave the bastard the finger, but she couldn't tell if he'd seen it. He'd turned to look at his girlfriend. Well, Allie thought, maybe she'd have another chance on the way down. A guy like that, he probably wouldn't be able to pass up an opportunity to show her up again. She knew his type.

The doors opened, and she and Tom stepped inside. They moved to the far side of the car, so they'd be able to look out at the Las Vegas night as the elevator descended. Hopefully, the car wouldn't move as quickly going down as it had on the way up—not unless the maintenance crews were used to scraping fish-scented puke off the windows every day. Allie frowned. The damn thing had shot up to the roof like one of those "free fall" rides that crazy people get on in amusement parks, probably because they'd liked getting dropped on their heads when they were babies. You'd never find her on one of those things.

The other diners packed inside behind them. Allie felt an elbow dig into her side, and turned to face the jerk who was poking her. He was a skinny, mousy-looking guy in his late forties, maybe early fifties, with thinning hair, badly stained teeth, and an aura about him that positively screamed *loser*. He didn't look like a tourist—no telltale baggy shorts or Hawaiian shirts or fanny pack, but that crappy jacket and tie looked like he'd pulled them out of a goodwill clothing donation bin. He was probably a... whatever it was people in Las Vegas called themselves? Vegans? Las Vegans? Nevadans? Whatever you called him, rude was rude, and he should have known better than to go swinging his arms around in a crowded elevator.

"Sorry," he said, flashing an embarrassed smile. "Kinda crowded in here, huh?" When Allie's only response was a heated glare and a deep, warning frown, he laughed nervously and quickly pulled his arms in tightly, moving his hands in front of his body. "Sorry," he repeated, then turned to face the doors as they closed.

Standing just ahead of him, Allie noted, was the thug and his girlfriend. The guy moved his head to look over his shoulder and winked at her.

Unfortunately, the car was too packed for her to get her middle fingers up, so Allie had to settle for grinding her teeth, and sneering at the back of his head. Fucker, she thought, as the car began its slow descent.

"Hey," Tom asked quietly. "What's going on?"

Allie started, and turned back to him. "Hmm? Oh, I was just looking at some asshole up there."

"Yeah? Some SOB's giving my wife trouble?" he said in mock anger. "On our *wedding night*?" Tom looked at the crowd, but the thug had turned around, and Allie didn't really feel like pointing him out. "Well, we'll just see about that." He hitched up his belt, tough guy-style, and smiled. "Want me to take care of him, whichever one it is?"

He held up his fists, ready to go to war for the honor of his woman. Of course, in the crowded car, his hands only got as high as his waist, but it was fairly clear he was trying to put on a boxing stance, and not prove to her that he could jerk off with two hands in a public setting. Although, knowing Tom, anything was possible when he was trying to impress her. He'd agreed to get married just because she'd wanted to, hadn't he? It wasn't as though *he'd* come to Vegas with that idea, but once she'd brought it up, he couldn't very well back down: his ego wouldn't have allowed it. And what was that he'd said to her in the restaurant? That's why God gave us two hands and an imagination? But you know, if he wanted to impress her with a display of his two-fisted masturbatory prowess... Well, he could wait until they got off the freakin' elevator and back to the room. Not that that sort of stuff really impressed her. Much.

Okay, maybe just a little.

"Or how about I just start throwing punches at all of them," Tom continued, "and hope I eventually make contact with the fucker?"

No, he was talking about boxing, all right. Allie grinned. "Honey, he'd snap you in two before you got to throw the first punch."

Tom tilted his head, in the direction of the mousy guy with the stabbing elbows, and raised an eyebrow. "What, this guy?" he whispered. "He doesn't even look strong enough to snap his fingers."

Allie put a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing out loud. "You'd only pick on that guy because you know you could beat him in a fight."

Tom looked at her like she'd finally caught on to what he'd been saying. "Well... yeah," he said. "What, you think I'm stupid enough to go picking on some guy who could *kill* me?"

Allie glanced at the mousy guy. It was obvious he'd heard the entire conversation; she could see the sweat running down the side

of his face. Oh, Christ, she thought. We went and scared the shit outta him.

She gently tapped the man on the shoulder. "Excuse me," she began.

His head jerked around, and she could see that his eyes were wide with fear. Jesus! Allie thought. He looks like he's gonna have a stroke!

"Hey, are you all right?" she asked.

He smiled nervously. "Y-yeah. Sure," he stammered. "W-why wouldn't I be?" He shrugged in a jittery kind of way. "Couple people standing behind you, talking about how they're gonna beat the shit outta you... What's there to worry about, right?"

Allie tried to put on her friendliest smile. Just looking at this guy was starting to make her as nervous as he was, especially now that the people closest to them were staring at her. "My..." She faltered. Still hard to get the word out. "My husband was just kidding around," she explained. "You know, making a joke. He wasn't *really* going to do anything." Oh, yeah, *that* should really put his mind at ease. Allie bit her bottom lip. Was it her imagination, or did that excuse sound as lame to everybody else as it did to her?

Apparently, it *wasn't* just her imagination, because the caustic glances turned her way made it clear that no one had found the joke the least bit amusing. Allie looked to Tom and grimaced. It sure felt hot in this elevator all of a sudden.

The car came to a sudden halt and made a lurch, away from the Tower.

The shift threw everyone backward, away from the doors. Allie shrieked in pain as the weight of two dozen passengers slammed down on her, flattening her against one of the windows. The car filled with screams, drowning hers out, and people began making frantic efforts to reach the doors. All the moving around only succeeded in redistributing the weight, so that more of it pressed down on her.

The air was forced from her lungs. Her pelvis was being crushed against the metal safety railing; she could actually hear the bones grinding beneath her skin. The same was happening to her face. Her

left cheek was pinned against the glass... and she could feel the bone starting to break under the immense pressure.

"Please..." she whined, but the sound barely made it past her numbed lips. No one could hear her, anyway. The sudden shriek of buckling metal was too loud.

The elevator lurched again, and it was clear to Allie that the car was no longer completely attached to the side of the building, suddenly, she was looking straight down at Las Vegas Boulevard. Straight down at the cars and the lights and the people who must be passing by below, completely unaware of what was happening one hundred stories above them.

There were more cries of horror; more desperate attempts to get out of a deathtrap from which there was no escape. Some male voice yelling for everyone to remain calm, to stop moving about because it was only going to put more stress on the elevator. Another voice telling him to go fuck himself, they were all gonna die.

The weight on top of her became unbearable. Allie screamed with what little breath she could summon, knowing that, at any moment, her skull was about to fracture. Tears filled her reddening eyes, and she dimly thought she could hear Tom calling her name, could feel him reaching out for her—

When suddenly, with a loud cracking sound, the window split along both sides, came loose from its frame... and fell out. The desert winds grabbed hold of the glass and swept it high into the night sky, before sending it plummeting toward the Strip.

For a moment, the relief from the crushing weight was a godsend. But Allie suddenly realized she was looking at a sheer drop of just over a thousand feet—and the people lying on top of her were pushing her through the gap where the glass had been.

"Oh, God, NO!" she screamed, and threw her arms out, to grab the edges of the window frame. Broken shards of glass and twisted bits of metal dug into her palms, slicing through the skin right down to the bone. Blood geysered onto the frame and guardrail, onto her hands and arms and face, onto the floor around her feet. She couldn't see, couldn't hold on, couldn't find any footing. Everything was too slippery. She felt light-headed from the sudden blood loss, and a

sudden chill enveloped her as an icy breeze swept into the tilting car. It stroked her blood-spattered cheeks, her lips, cooled her forehead with its gentle caress. In the midst of her agony, she thought she heard a tiny voice telling her to let go, promising everything would turn out all right, but she knew that was crazy. It was probably just the sound of her blood pounding in her ears.

The wind tugged at her, pulled at her clothing, and an odd thought popped into Allie's mind: now she knew what people meant when they said they'd felt the touch of death.

And then the car moved forward again, and she lost her balance. Her feet slipped out from under her. Her hands were torn apart, the skin flayed from the bone by glass and metal as she slid along the edge of the window frame.

Before she could even scream, she was falling.

It was the mousy guy who saved her, snaring her right wrist with one hand as she began her dive toward the pavement. He braced his knees against the guardrail and grabbed her wrist with his other hand as well. Allie looked up with tear-filled eyes to thank him, then screamed as an elderly couple tumbled over his shoulders and out through the window frame. The old man bounced off Allie, almost breaking her savior's grip, but the skinny guy seemed to have incredible strength—some kind of adrenalin rush that was powering his muscles.

But he couldn't hold onto her for much longer. Her arms, her clothes, were drenched in blood, and though the man did his best to maintain his grip, she was slipping from his hands. He knew it as well. His eyes were practically bugging out as he looked down at her, and he kept repeating "No, no, no" over and over, either because he was pleading for some sort of divine intervention to help him, or because he couldn't believe he was really going to drop her.

More people were falling from the elevator, either dropping through the open window or crashing through the other glass panels. Some made desperate grabs for Allie's legs, and she found herself kicking at them before they could take hold of her. It was an instinctive action, that "fight or flight" state of mind scientists talk about that takes hold when someone is struggling to survive, but she

still hated herself for giving in to it. Tears filled her eyes, and she cried for the people she couldn't help; most of all, though, she cried for herself.

She was going to die, just when she thought her life was finally starting to turn around. Just when she'd come to realize there was someone with whom she could share that new life; with whom she *wanted* to share that new life. And now it was all being taken away from her because some fucking lazy repairman hadn't bothered to do his job and make sure the elevator was safe before people got into it.

It all seemed so stupid. And so goddamn unfair.

Allie looked past the man holding her, to try and find Tom. She needed to know he was there, needed to know he was all right. She caught sight of the wedding band on his left hand, but she couldn't see the rest of him. Some kind of dark liquid had spilled on the window where he'd been standing, and it prevented her from seeing into the car.

But then she realized the dark liquid was blood. Tom's blood. He was flattened against the glass, against the one window that hadn't shattered, his body crushed by the weight of the people who had fallen on top of him. Where his head should have been was a mass of broken bone and torn flesh, and pulped brain matter that slid back and forth across the glass as the elevator shuddered and bucked on its broken tracks. What remained of his mouth was locked wide open in an eternal scream, his tongue bitten in half by the teeth that were now scattered across the growing stain. One eye rolled through the gore in a wide arc, still attached to the optic nerve that had unspooled from the pulverized socket.

The scream that had been building in Allie's throat became instead a torrent of bile that erupted from her open mouth. Beer and bits of chocolate mousse joined the clot-like hunks of partially digested catfish that roared up from her stomach to cover her blood-soaked clothes. She spasmed wildly as her stomach lurched again and that was the moment when she finally slipped loose from the mousy man's grip.

She saw him make a panicked grab for her, and then it looked as though the elevator was racing away from her. But it wasn't the

elevator that was moving, the voice in the back of her head said—it was her.

Allie tumbled backward, and now she was looking down at the lights of Las Vegas Boulevard. Lights that had seemed so very far away not that long ago, but which were getting closer with every passing moment.

It felt like she was falling for hours, but a part of her knew it was all happening in a matter of seconds. Long, countless seconds during which she could see and feel everything with incredible clarity. The horrified expressions of the Michael Madsen-lookalike goon and his girlfriend as they dropped alongside her. The rush of wind drying the blood that coated her face and arms. The flapping of the broken bones and loose tatters of skin that used to be her hands.

The sidewalk that seemed to be rushing up to meet her.

Long, countless seconds during which there were no last words to say, no flash-memories of the special moments in her life playing across her mind's eye, no opportunities to express regret for all the poor choices she'd made in her twenty-five years, or to beg for forgiveness from the people she'd hurt by making them.

Long, countless seconds during which she was able to turn her body so she wouldn't see the end coming, only to realize the elevator had finally torn loose from its tracks and was now bearing down on her. A glass-walled coffin that echoed with the shouts and curses and cries for mercy of its passengers as it hurtled earthward from a star-filled sky.

Long, countless seconds during which the only thing she could do was scream. A screeching, high-pitched cry of sheer terror that tore its way out of her throat and over her bloodstained lips.

A scream that abruptly ended as her body exploded against the pavement.

ELEVEN

The scream caught Warren completely by surprise, and almost ruptured his eardrums with its intensity. Not to mention it scared the living shit out of him.

It was difficult to locate its source, even though he knew it originated from somewhere directly behind him, because the damn elevator was packed with too many riders for him to turn around. Couldn't two or three of these blockheaded, out-of-town fuckers have waited for the next car, he wondered? Hadn't they ever heard of weight restrictions on these things?

He looked over his shoulder, and his eyebrows shot up in surprise. Well, son of a bitch, he thought. It was the brunette who'd been watching him in the restaurant. What the hell was her problem now?

"What's going on?" Shawna asked in a whisper.

"Beats me," he said, flashing what he hoped looked like a calming smile. This is all I need, he thought sarcastically. Bad enough Shawna's still a little freaked out by that goddamn panther, now we're stuck in here with some basket case.

"Stop it!" the woman cried. "Stop the elevator! We have to get out!"

Shawna glanced at Warren. "Maybe she's claustrophobic," he explained. Yeah, or maybe she's just nuts, he added silently. It's not like the world doesn't have its share of crazy broads with big tits—just look at that Anna-Nicole what's-her-name. And they even gave her *her* own TV show!

"Please!" the woman insisted in shrill tone. "You have to stop it! You have to stop it now!"

"Oh, let her off, for Christ's sake!" said a man near Warren. "The bitch is making me deaf with all that goddamn screaming."

Shawna's eyes were as wide as saucers as she looked at Warren. It was starting to get to her.

"Easy, honey," he said gently. "She's just nervous." He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

"That makes two of us," she replied.

Over the rising objections of his fellow passengers, some of whom were pointedly telling the woman to shut the fuck up, Warren noticed the brunette had gone quiet for a couple of seconds. Probably her husband was telling her to calm down, they'd be getting off in a little bit.

That wasn't good enough, apparently. Warren stumbled forward as the guy behind him slammed into his back. Warren turned to give the skinny, badly dressed creep a stern warning, only to realize it wasn't his fault. The woman was pushing against the guy, trying to force her way to the front of the car.

"Stop it! Stop it!" she kept saying. "Please! You have to stop it or we're all going to die!"

That was it, Warren decided. Feeling closed in was understandable; some people just couldn't handle tight spaces. But yelling about how everyone was about to die was akin to shouting, "Fire!" in a crowded theater. It was dangerous and stupid, and it had to end right now.

"Hey!" he roared. "Knock it off!"

Everyone fell silent. The woman had made it past the other guy, and now she and Warren were standing face to face.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he growled.

"I'm trying to save our lives!" she bellowed.

"Yeah?" Warren said. "Well, you can start by saving my hearing." He reached into his jacket and came out with his badge. "Detective Ackerman, Las Vegas Police. Now lower your voice, and maybe I'll reconsider charging you with creating a public disturbance and inciting to riot."

"Charge me with anything you want to," she snapped, "but you've gotta get everybody off this elevator!" Much to Warren's surprise, the girl grabbed the lapels of his jacket. "Please," she said, a slight quiver in her voice. "You're a police officer. You could make them get off before it's too late."

"I could make you spend the night in a jail cell just as much," he answered, then glanced down at her hands. She was twisting his lapels in her fists. "Now, let go."

"No!" she yelled. "You've got to stop it!"

"God Almighty!" said an elderly woman standing by the control panel. "I'll stop the damn thing if it'll make you shut up!"

She punched the button for the 115th floor, and the elevator slowed down. The other passengers groaned. Apparently, none of them were the kind of high rollers who could afford the suites on the upper ten floors of the Tower, so none of them were pleased by having to make an inconvenient stop.

"Looks like you get your wish," Warren said to the girl. His voice dripped with sarcasm.

She didn't seem to notice. "Thank God," she whispered.

When the car arrived at 115, the bell chimed lightly, and the doors opened. Now the woman began pushing in earnest, and Warren and Shawna were caught in the flow of humanity as it surged forward. Warren had a momentary impression that the brunette was trying to shove *everyone* out of the car, but that wasn't about to happen. If she were lucky, she'd be able to get out in one piece, before someone got it into their head to knock her on her ass.

Warren had to remind himself that, as a representative of the Las Vegas Police Department, he couldn't be the one to do it. The chiefs at Metro wouldn't like it.

"Please, please, you have to get out," she begged. She pulled at some of the passengers, pushed at others, but all they did was shove her toward the open doors, or look away and pretend to ignore her. And now Warren could see the tears running down her cheeks, the desperate pleading in her eyes. She really was convinced everybody was going to die if they remained on the elevator.

But what could have put that idea in her head, he wondered? He hadn't heard the elevator making any weird mechanical noises, unless you counted the bastardized muzak version of the Animals' "We Gotta Get Outta This Place" that was coming out of the speaker in the ceiling. Maybe that had something to do with the brunette's panic; songs about dying young weren't exactly what you'd call soothing. The ride seemed pretty smooth: no shuddering, no shaking, no vibrations in the glass panels or grinding of gears. And as a member of the Coaster Kings, he knew a thing or two about things

that went up and down on tracks, even if elevators were a completely different kind of animal from roller coasters.

With her husband in tow, awkwardly apologizing to everyone he bumped into along the way, the woman finally made it to the front of the elevator. It was clear that, if the other passengers were unwilling to listen to her, she'd at least make sure her husband didn't take the plunge with them. Not that he seemed to believe her, either. But her mind was made up, apparently, and the guy wasn't going to argue with her about the scene she was making. Warren shook his head. For a couple that looked as though they hadn't been married very long, the husband had certainly been pussy-whipped into a submissive role fast enough. Poor bastard.

As she reached the front of the elevator, the woman turned around to address the crowd. "Look, I... I know you all think I'm nuts, but I'm telling you the truth. You have to get off this elevator right now. It's..." She spun her hands in small circles in front of her, apparently trying to find the right words to say that would convince the crowd of her sincerity. "It's going to crash," she said quickly, like she didn't want to give anyone the chance to argue with her. "It's going to fall off the building and crash down on the street and everybody is going to die."

Warren gnashed his teeth. "Jesus Christ, that's it!" he snapped. He surged forward and grabbed the woman by the arm. "You and I are gonna have a little talk about what it means to be a public nuisance." He pushed her into the gap between the open doors. "You want out? Then get moving." He turned to Shawna. "Honey, would you mind waiting down in the—"

And that's when the doors slammed together right on the woman. She screamed like she'd been cut in half.

"Allie!" her husband cried. He grabbed at the doors, trying to force them apart, but they weren't budging. Luckily, if such a thing as luck could be considered in a terrifying situation like this, the man's wife had been in the process of exiting, so the doors missed closing on her head... by inches. She still must have been in incredible pain, Warren figured, and the panic she was going through only made matters worse.

But the doors couldn't have just closed on their own, could they?

He let go of her arm, and wheeled around to the old woman by the control panel. "What did you do?" he demanded.

"Nothing!" she said, hands held up like she was surrendering... or just to show she hadn't been playing with the buttons. "I didn't do anything!" She was clearly upset, but whether it was from his accusation or the sight of the girl caught in the doors, he couldn't tell.

He stabbed at the "open" button with his thumb, pressed it in so hard the nail went white from the pressure, but the doors remained shut.

"Tom! Help me!" the woman, Allie, yelled. She moaned, as though the air was being squeezed out of her lungs. "God, oh, God, *it's killing me!*"

Warren turned to the old woman, and pointed at the "open" button. "Keep pressing that!" he ordered. Then he joined the husband, Tom, in his efforts to free his wife. "Get the other side!" Warren told him, pointing to the left door panel. As Tom did as he was told, Warren took hold of the right-side panel.

The two men pulled at the doors, but no matter how much effort they put into it, the panels refused to slide back. It was almost as though the metal was putting up resistance. Like the car was really out to do this woman harm.

And no sooner had that thought occurred to him, then he suddenly felt the car start to move downward.

"Tom!" Allie screamed. "Tom! It's moving! Somebody, please stop it! Please!"

Warren looked back at the woman near the control panel. She was still pushing the button that should have opened the doors long before now. "I didn't do anything!" she yelled. "I'm pressing the button! You told me to keep pressing the button!"

The elevator was dropping slowly, an inch at a time, as though it was savoring the hysteria its actions were creating. But that was nuts, Warren knew—inanimate objects only tried to kill people in bad Stephen King movies, not in real life. There must have been something wrong with the wiring or the hydraulics.

Well, whatever the cause, the damn thing was on the move, and the doors still wouldn't open. Unless he and the husband found some way to pry apart the panels, or there was some kind of divine intervention, the girl was either going to be crushed to death or torn in half.

Warren turned to the other passengers. They stood impassively, even Shawna, watching but offering no assistance. A bunch of doe-eyed spectators caught up in viewing a reality show that was being acted out right in front of them.

"Help us, for Christ's sake!" he barked at them. But instead of stepping forward to join in on the rescue effort, they widened their eyes in surprise and moved back a step.

All except for one, who moved to the front of the car. He was the skinny, creepy-looking guy in a rumpled suit and scuffed shoes who'd bumped into him when the girl started shoving toward the doors. The word "loser" seemed stamped across his forehead, but at this point, Warren wasn't about to reject any offers of aid. Any port in a storm, and all that.

Without a mumbled "Excuse me," the guy slipped between Warren and Tom, and reached up to the top of the elevator between the door and the floor landing. There was a sharp clicking sound, and the doors suddenly sprang open.

Tom immediately grabbed his wife and quickly pushed her out of the elevator. Warren and the little creep followed, with Shawna right behind them. The doors slammed shut, just missing her, and the elevator moved on.

Allie and Tom stood off to one side of the bay. She was shaking with terror, and he'd wrapped his arms around her to offer comfort. He looked over to the creep. "Thank you, Mr?"

"Ploog," the loser said. "Arlen Ploog." He shrugged. "I worked on elevator repairs once, for about eight months. All you had to do was re-trip the electric eye over the doors."

"Well, why the fuck didn't you do that sooner?" Warren demanded.

The guy smiled nervously and looked at his feet. "I thought you knew what you were doing," he said quietly. "I didn't wanna get in the way."

Warren turned to face Allie. "You all right?"

"Of course she's not all right," Tom shouted. "She almost got killed just now!"

Warren glared at the man, and debated whether or not he should verbally tear him a new asshole. But then the little voice in the back of his mind muttered a warning. Ease up there, 'Ren, it said. The guy and his wife have just gone through a major trauma. You'd be even more worked up than him if it'd been Shawna who got caught in the doors. So, don't go biting his head off 'cause he's a little hyper.

Yeah, he thought, that *does* make a lotta sense. Besides, there are plenty of other ways to handle this. "You're Tom, right?" he asked.

"Yeah," the man replied, and pointed at the girl. "I'm her husband."

Warren nodded. "Okay, Tom," he said gently. "Now, I'm gonna need you to calm down, all right? I know how you must be feeling. I know you're pissed off and upset and you don't know where to direct all that anger that's built up inside of you, but it's not gonna do either you or your wife any good by yelling at me." He put on his best we're-all-friends-here smile. "I'm on your side, okay?"

For a moment, Tom looked like he was about to launch another salvo; then the fight slowly drained out of him. "Yeah," he said quietly. "Sorry, officer."

"Detective," Warren corrected him.

"Detective," Tom repeated.

Confident that that fire had been put out, Warren directed the smile at the wife. "And you're Allie."

"Yes," she said.

"Okay, Allie." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder, in the direction of the elevator track. "You feel up to tellin' me what *that* was all a—"

The building shuddered. Not enough to throw everyone off their feet, but definitely enough to get their attention.

"Oh, my God!" Shawna cried. "Was that a bomb? I think that was a bomb!"

"It wasn't a bomb," Warren said assertively. At least he hoped it wasn't a bomb, although that had been his first impression as well.

"Uh, Detective... I think you better take a look at this."

Warren turned around. The nervous, bug-eyed guy who'd tripped the door safety, Ploog, was standing at the floor-to-ceiling window on the left side of the elevator bay. His forehead and hands were pressed against the glass, and he was staring at something down below.

Warren ran over; he could hear the others thundering up behind him. But even before he got there, he had a sickening feeling he already knew what he was going to see. And yet he still had to take a look for himself, just to be certain. As he arrived at the window, he looked down to where Ploog was pointing.

"Jesus Christ," he whispered.

The elevator, the very car from which they'd stepped less than a minute ago, was hanging off the side of the Tower at a forty-five degree angle. Somehow, the tracks on which it ran had separated from their moorings, had snapped off from the building, and the car was now suspended above Las Vegas Boulevard.

"Oh my God!" Shawna cried. But it wasn't the shrill tone of her voice that sent an unexpected chill up Warren's spine. It was the screams of the passengers trapped in the elevator. Even five stories above the scene, he could hear the terrified shrieks of the people down there.

People who knew they were going to die.

Far below, he could see the flashing lights of emergency vehicles racing to the scene. Someone must have put in a 911 call right away because the assembly of patrol cars, ambulances and fire trucks were making good time, even with traffic at a standstill along both sides of the Strip. But there was nothing they could possibly do to prevent what was about to happen. At one hundred stories, the elevator was too high up to reach with anything but a helicopter, and at its current angle, too far out from the building for rescue workers to extend a ladder. None of that really mattered, though. There would be no time for a rescue; no time to stop what was inevitable.

The Tower shook again as another section of the car's guide rails peeled away from the concrete shaft, changing the elevator's angle to a rough ninety degrees. And then the first of the passengers crashed

through the car's windows, and began the long, fatal plunge to the street.

Shawna moaned and buried her face in Warren's chest. "No, no, no," she sobbed, and he reached up to gently stroke her hair. Like that was going to make everything all better.

More people fell as the elevator quivered, as though it was deliberately trying to shake loose its passengers. A crazy notion, Warren knew, but nothing seemed to make sense anymore, so why not a killer elevator? The air was filled with screams, loud enough to cause small vibrations even in the windows through which the small group of survivors watched the horror unfold.

So many screams, Warren thought. So many bodies.

But he knew the worst was yet to come.

TWELVE

It was close to two in the morning, and Tony Augustino decided it was time to take a break. Four more hours and he'd be done with this shithole for another day—or night, as it were.

Oh, sure, he was glad enough to have a job, it sure as hell beat sitting around his apartment, trying to get by on those meager social security checks that came every month, but all the cheesy King Arthur crap he was surrounded by ten or eleven hours every night would make anyone nuts after awhile. Merlin's Tower wasn't what he considered a "real" Las Vegas hotel and casino; it was a bad magic act in search of an audience. Suits of armor and assholes in jingly bell caps and old geezers dressed like rejects from *fuckin' Lord of the Rings*. That wasn't Vegas, that was a goddamn theme park. Vegas, the *true* Vegas, was Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin and Joey Bishop, maybe even Tom Jones and Wayne Newton, not a bunch of queers and strippers in tights, flying around on fuckin' wires like Superman. It was shit like that that had turned this city into a fuckin' joke that the whole world laughed at.

Back in his day, when he was a pit boss working at the Sands long before it closed, Vegas had an edge to it, a sort of controlled lawlessness where the Families enforced the rules. It was the place people visited when they wanted to relax, take in a show, maybe do a little business. It wasn't the kind of place to build amusement parks, because that's all the hotels were these days, with gambling halls stuck in the middle of them. There were roller coasters and pirate ships, circus freaks and magicians, even a freakin' volcano, and now some of the hotels were getting rid of some of their rooms and turning them into condominiums! When, Tony often wondered, did this city get its balls cut off?

He exited from the Tower through an "employees only" side door that led to the underground parking garage, then followed the west side ramp out to the Strip. The boulevard was still pretty busy this time of night, more with automobiles than with people walking about. Most of the cars that cruised by were filled with teenagers

obviously out to impress each other with their tricked-out rides (at least Tony thought that was the right phrase; he'd heard it when he was watching *Monster Garage* one night on cable). A few yellow minivans, the Vegas version of taxi cabs, went by to break up the monotony of all the flashy looking cars with the spinning steel rims on their wheels, and the blaring stereo systems with the bass cranked up so high the fillings in Tony's teeth were vibrating from twenty yards away.

Not that he ever saw anything different happen when he stepped out for a break during his shift. At this end of the Strip, at this time of night, the only places of interest were the Tower and the Stratosphere, across the street. The real tourist attractions like the Bellagio or Bally's were down at the other end of town, so most out-of-towners you saw up here were either guests of the two mammoth towers, or diners from The Lady of the Lake heading back to their rooms at the other hotels. Other than that, the streets belonged to the youth of Las Vegas, and if *they* represented the future of the town, then Tony figured it wouldn't be long until the Strip was nothing but an endless string of Starbuck's coffeehouses and Nike sneaker stores and Krispy Kreme doughnut shops. It wouldn't be long in coming; hell, it had already started. And when a guy like Tony Augustino saw a place like Las Vegas go from being the hip center of the universe to being trendy, it was maybe time to pack his bags and get the fuck outta Dodge.

The Sands, the Dunes, the Hacienda, the Landmark, the Marina—all of them gone. Knocked down and carted away to make room for newer, shinier, trendier establishments as the city constantly looked for ways to reinvent itself. Because people today had no respect at all for the past, especially the kids.

Kids like that punk Aldis Escobar who used to work for the Tower... up until last night, that is. A real shame, him getting into that traffic accident right after leaving work and winding up smeared across his dashboard. But he was a smartass and a troublemaker, at least as far as Tony was concerned, and shitheads like that always get it in the end, one way or another. That was just how things worked in Las Vegas: sometimes you eat the bear, sometimes the fuckin' bear

eats you. And ole Smokey took one helluva bite outta that kid, didn't he?

Tony was feeling pretty pleased with that mental image when something heavy came whistling down from out of the night sky. It sounded like a bomb dropping from a plane, and might as well have been one from the way it practically exploded when it smashed through the windshield of a Humvee traveling northbound on the boulevard.

Whoever was behind the wheel must have been killed on impact, because the Hummer went spinning out of control and swerved across the Strip. It slammed into a Nissan Altima and a Ford Mustang in the southbound lanes, then flipped over and came to rest on its side—just in time for a Jeep Pathfinder to plow into its gas tank.

The explosion incinerated the cars and their occupants, and threw a cherry red Toyota Camry and a black Chevy Corvette in the north lanes onto their roofs. Then the shockwave traveled the width of the Strip, flipping more vehicles and throwing passersby on the sidewalks high into the air. Some fell heavily back onto the asphalt with bone-crushing impacts, while others were sent soaring through the plate-glass windows of storefronts along both sides of the street. Tony had just enough time to realize what was happening before the force of the blast knocked him off his feet. He went rolling down the garage ramp for a good twelve or fifteen feet, his white dress shirt picking up every speck of dirt, absorbing every spot of motor oil and transmission fluid, along the way. When he finally came to rest, he looked less like a night manager for a four-star restaurant and more like a grease monkey from an auto repair shop.

Tony fought his way back to his feet and staggered out from the garage entrance to see just what the hell was going on. The air was filled with the shriek of security alarms and the moans of the injured. Fires roared among the wrecked vehicles, and thick, black clouds, formed from burning rubber tires, drifted high into the sky. From off in the distance, Tony could hear sirens, which meant the cops were already on their way.

More objects rained down on the boulevard, and now drivers and passengers alike were abandoning their vehicles and running for cover. Some headed for the Stratosphere; most scrambled for the protective concrete awning that covered the front doors of Merlin's Tower. A few didn't make it more than a few steps from their cars before a hunk of rock or a piece of metal struck them down. They never got back up. Whatever was falling was big and weighty, like someone was heaving blocks of stone out of a window.

Tony looked up along the south wall of the Tower, following the trail of debris back to its source. In the light of the full moon, it didn't take long to make out the silhouette of the observation elevator, sticking out from the building at a dangerous angle.

"Fuck," Tony said. "I thought maintenance was gonna fix that goddamn thing."

Well, it was obvious they hadn't, and Tony cursed himself for ever thinking he could trust that cocksucker Joe Murphy to do his fuckin' job. And as sure as God made little green apples, when the cops started asking questions, that Irish prick would deny that Tony ever told him about any problems with the elevator.

Tony felt his stomach do a quick flip; the lining of his throat burned with a sudden onset of acid reflux. Apparently, the carp he'd had for dinner wasn't sitting so well.

It got even worse when he noticed the people falling.

Black spots against a velvet blue sky, they grew in size, in shape, until Tony thought he could actually make out every shocked expression, every look of horror, of disbelief in their faces. The air vibrated with the sound of their screams, cries of terror that were loud enough to drown out the car alarms and approaching sirens. Cries that were brutally cut short by unyielding concrete and asphalt that pulverized bone and liquified flesh, that splashed blood and brain and intestine across the sidewalk and street in front of the Tower.

But then a new sound tore through the night: a shrill, nerve-jangling shriek like a million fingernails being dragged across a blackboard.

Tony looked up again. "Oh, holy shit." he whispered.

With a final quiver, the elevator finally tore loose from Merlin's Tower.

It swung far away from the building, stripping the guide rails from their concrete base as the car began its downward arc. The drop was gradual at first, but then the car began picking up momentum. Shrapnel fell like lethal hailstones as one hundred stories' worth of railing broke free along the length of the Tower, and Tony ran back to the safety of the garage. And as the rails unraveled, the elevator's arc grew wider, and it soon became clear that it wasn't going to come down at the foot of the Tower. It was headed for the center of Las Vegas Boulevard.

The first emergency vehicle to arrive on the scene was a fire engine from a nearby ladder company. The firefighters inside barely had time to notice the glass-and-steel box hurtling down at them before the elevator slammed into the cab of the truck, sweeping the vehicle to one side. The bodies of firemen and some of the elevator's remaining passengers were tossed in all directions as the car continued its path of destruction, plowing through the abandoned vehicles gathered on the Strip. Gas tanks ruptured; massive explosions shook the street; bodies, and parts of bodies, littered the sidewalks. It was a scene straight out of hell... or the Apocalypse. And as tough a guy as he liked to portray himself to everyone he dealt with, as much of a "goodfella" as he liked to make himself out to be, even Tony Augustino had to look away from the carnage.

With a final screech of twisting metal, the elevator at last came to rest in the large curved driveway that ran from the Strip to the Tower's front doors. If there were any survivors within its twisted metal frame, it was doubtful they'd be alive for much longer. And maybe that was for the best.

When the world eventually stopped bucking and heaving under his feet from all the explosions and shockwaves, Tony made his way out of the garage. The area looked like a war zone, especially the main entrance to the Tower. The driveway had been plowed up, the sidewalk was stained a deep crimson, every window and door had been shattered and blown in, and everywhere Tony looked there were bodies. Or pieces of them.

"Oh, I am *not* takin' the fuckin' heat for this," he swore.

And then a sharp rumbling noise caught his attention. He looked up to spot a slab of concrete break off the Tower and begin its forty-story plunge to street level. A slab that, to him, looked like it could have been the size of Texas. A slab that was heading right for the spot where he was standing.

"Fuck me," he croaked. Not the most profound last words one could say, given the circumstances, but it was the best Tony could do on short notice. And about all he could get out just before the panhandle turned him into a wide crimson blotch on the sidewalk.

Had he the time to think about it, he probably wouldn't have been surprised to learn the ole Grim Reaper had him in his sights that night. After all, that was just how things worked in Las Vegas.

Sometimes you ate the bear; sometimes the fuckin' bear ate you.

"Mother pusbucket," Ploog said, his voice a strange mixture of awe and disbelief.

Warren gently put his arms around Shawna's shoulders, and gently kissed her forehead. It was a sick, badly timed thought that now came to him, but he suddenly realized she at last had something to take her mind off the panther that had stalked her only hours ago.

And if you're a smart man, Ackerman, he told himself, you will *never* say that out loud. To anyone.

"Oh... Oh, my God..." he heard Allie say in a quivering voice. "Oh, my God!"

As one, he, Shawna and Ploog slowly turned around, to stare at the newlyweds. They'd backed away from the windows, and Tom was holding her up, her knees were shaking that badly. Allie was white as the proverbial sheet and crying, her hands pressed over her mouth as though she were suppressing a scream that wouldn't stay inside much longer. Tom looked almost as freaked out as his wife, but it was hard to tell if that was because they'd just dodged a bullet by getting off the elevator, or because his significant other had somehow known it was about to happen. He stared at her, then at the group,

then back to her. Apparently, he couldn't figure out what to say or do next.

Warren didn't have that problem. As he watched Allie tremble with fear and remorse, he could feel the barrier establishing itself around his heart, closing him off to the pain she was experiencing. This was a police matter now, and whether all those people in the elevator had just died either by accident or by design, he had a job to do, and an investigation to run. And he knew exactly where to begin.

He stepped away from Shawna and pointed at Allie. "If you've got something to say," he ordered sharply, "you better say it right now."

"W-what?" she said through the tears. It was obvious she was too upset to understand what he was talking about, but there was no time for that. She had information, and he wanted it.

Tom stepped forward, placing himself between Warren and Allie. "Back off, man," he warned. By the aggressive stance he took, feet slightly apart, hands balled into fists, it was clear he knew what Warren meant, and was angered enough by the accusation to maybe do something stupid. "Can't you see how upset she is?"

"She knew that was gonna happen, Warren replied, gesturing toward the elevator doors. "I wanna know how."

"She doesn't know how!" Tom shouted. The muscles in his arms and legs tensed, like he was getting ready to spring.

Warren thrust a warning finger in his face. "You better stand the fuck down right now, pal, before you find yourself in a world of trouble. I know you think you're helping your wife by gettin' in my face, but you're not gonna be much help to her if you're spending the rest of the night in lock-up for assaulting a police officer. You get me?"

Allie reached forward, and placed a hand on her husband's right arm. "Tom, don't," she said. "Please."

He looked at his wife. "But, Allie, he thinks you had something to do with it," he explained.

She sniffed loudly, and wiped her runny nose along the side of her left index finger. "I know," she said, her voice thick with phlegm. She reached into her purse, came up with a couple of lipstick-stained tissues to dab at her eyes.

Tom glanced back at Warren, the anger giving way to panic, then Allie blew her nose into the Kleenex, and nodded.

"I'm not arresting anybody," Warren said. "Not yet, anyway." He stepped toward Allie, then looked at Tom. It was all up to the husband: either he made the right move and stepped aside, or he got stupid and tried to defend his wife.

Thankfully, it was common sense that won out. Tom lowered his eyes and took two steps away from Warren, giving the detective clear access to Allie.

She looked up at him, eyes wide and full of fear. "You think I caused that, don't you?" she asked. Her bottom lip trembled.

"I gotta be honest with you, Allie," Warren said. He tried flashing the friendly smile again, to try and put her at ease, but it didn't appear to work. "The scene you made back on the elevator puts you in a really bad light, given what just happened. Now, maybe you had nothing to do with it... and maybe you did. But either way, the heat is gonna get turned up fast on you for an explanation. A lot of innocent people just died, and you've got witnesses standing right in front of you," he gestured at Shawna and Ploog, both of whom were standing behind him, "who can testify that you displayed prior knowledge of the accident."

"Maybe we should be talking to a lawyer." Tom said.

Warren looked at him and nodded. He knew that was coming. "Sure, that's one way to go," he said mildly. "But that's only gonna complicate matters." It might also give her time to come up with a story to cover her ass, he thought, but he had to tread carefully now. If she decided to lawyer up, he wouldn't be able to question her until she'd spoken to an attorney, and even then the ambulance chaser would tell her to keep her mouth shut. You can't incriminate yourself if you don't say anything, right?

"But I *didn't* know about it," Allie said. "I mean-"

"Allie," Tom warned. "Don't say anything."

She waved him off. "I mean, I didn't know about it until just before it happened. It was like..." She paused, like she was trying to figure out how to describe it, or to play for time while she crafted her story.

"It was like this thing that just popped into my head. I could see it all happening, like I was right there in the middle of it."

"You mean like a daydream?" Shawna asked. Warren glanced over his shoulder at her and gave her a little smile. Then he put his index finger up to his mouth in a shushing gesture. It didn't help if his witnesses started helping the girl smooth out the rough patches in her tale.

"I... I guess it was like that," Allie said.

Warren frowned. Fuck, he thought. I'm gonna have to remind Shawna not to be so helpful next time.

"And then, somehow, I knew it was really gonna happen," Allie continued. "That it wasn't just a dream. It was like a... like a warning of some kind, to get out before we got killed."

"Like a premonition?" Ploog this time, throwing in his two cents. "Wow. Then I guess it's lucky we all got off with you, huh? Geez, talk about cheating death."

Warren turned to face him. "You mind?" he said sharply. Jesus Christ, at this rate, with all the aid she was getting from the people around her, the girl would be able to start claiming she was a psychic. Warren gnashed his teeth. And here he'd thought dealing with a lawyer was going to be his biggest problem.

"So, that's your story?" he asked Allie. "You're telling me you got some kind of mental flash about the elevator crashing, and you just *happened* to get off seconds before it did?"

She looked uncertain, but then she slowly nodded. "I know it sounds like bullshit," she admitted.

"You've got that right," Warren replied.

Allie gasped, and looked at him in shock. "You think I'd make something like that up?"

"I'm not saying you are," Warren replied.

"Yeah," her husband cut in. "But you're not saying you believe her, either."

"You're right," Warren admitted. "But are you gonna stand there and tell me your wife's story doesn't sound the least bit... bizarre?"

Tom's lips drew into a tight, thin line, and he stared at a spot on the carpeted floor for a moment. Then he gazed at Allie. She had a

look on her face that made it clear she was silently begging him to take her at her word, to have faith in her.

"Yeah," he said softly, turning to face Warren. "I... I guess it does."

"All right, then we're both on the same page." Warren looked to the wife. She was crestfallen; betrayed, as it were, by her own husband. "Now, Allie, are you sure you wanna go with what you just told me?"

But that's what happened." The uncertainty was gone from her voice now. She had her tale of a mysterious psychic warning—helped along, in part, by people you'd think should have known better than to butt into a police investigation—and it seemed as though nothing he said was going to change her mind. Like the old saying went, that's my story, and I'm sticking to it.

Terrific, Warren thought sourly. This oughtta go over well with the brass when I tell them. He shrugged. "Okay, Kreskin, but you're gonna have to repeat it when we get to Command."

"Whoa, whoa," Tom said, waving his hands around. "Now, just wait a goddamn minute." That hyper side of him was starting to creep back into the picture. "Are you arresting her? What's the charge?"

"No, I'm not arresting her," Warren replied. "But since she demonstrated having prior knowledge of the incident, even if it suddenly came to her in a 'dream', that makes her a... person of interest." Inwardly, he grimaced. It was the first time he'd ever said that phrase out loud, and it sounded just as lame coming from him as it did from any department spokesperson at a press conference.

"You mean she's a suspect," Tom said.

"I mean she's gonna have to give a formal statement." He turned around to include Shawna and Ploog in the discussion. "All of you are."

"Well, there go *my* plans for the evening," Ploog muttered.

"But it was an accident!" Allie said, a little shrilly. "I didn't have anything to do with it!" Apparently, the initial shock had passed, and the severity of her position was finally starting to sink in.

"Then the investigation will bear that out, won't it?" Warren asked. "For all I know, the elevator was on its last legs, and there was some kind of mechanical breakdown. Maybe you really did have a..." it was

a little hard to get himself to actually say the word, it sounded so stupid, "...a premonition that warned you to get out before the crash. And if that's the case, then I guess all of us owe you thanks for giving us the heads-up and getting us out in time.

"But until I find out otherwise," he pointed an accusatory finger at Allie, "lady, you've got a hell of a lotta questions to answer."

THIRTEEN

The female detective pushed a ballpoint pen and a pad of legal-sized yellow paper in front of her. "All right, let's go over this one more time. And this time, write it down."

The police interrogation room was as dull-looking and claustrophobic as any that Allie had ever seen on a TV cop show. Grayish-green paint covered the walls, giving the area the strange coloration of a cross between a hospital and a boiler room. Interlaced metal grillwork covered the two windows that looked out on a parking lot. The opposite wall contained a large mirror that was mounted near the only door leading in or out. Of course, it really wasn't a mirror, but a two-way mirror, the glass specially treated so that someone in the next room could look in to watch Allie, although she couldn't see them. The furniture consisted of a metal table, its legs bolted to the tiled floor, four high-backed metal chairs, and a couple of filing cabinets. This wasn't a place designed for comfort, for just sitting and chatting, and if the gloomy décor was meant to intimidate the suspects made to sit in here, then in Allie's opinion, it sure was effective. She certainly felt intimidated. Scared, even.

And so very tired.

She sighed wearily. "We've already been over it a dozen times," she said to the detective. "It's not gonna change from what I just told you two minutes ago. Or what I told you the last six times."

The woman, who had identified herself as Detective Montoya over two hours ago, simply nodded and smiled. There was no trace of warmth to be found in that brief flash of teeth, though, just a sense of escalating annoyance. "Humor me," she said, and her tone of voice made it clear she was starting to become weary, too. Weary of hearing what must sound to her like the biggest load of bullshit a suspect had ever unloaded in this interview room.

Not that Allie could really blame her. If someone had come to *her* with a story about having a premonition involving a major disaster just minutes before it occurred, she'd think it was a bunch of crap, too. That didn't mean, however, that she'd keep badgering that

person for hours, trying to get them to crack and say it was all a lie. Like Detective Montoya was working so hard to do, in Allie's case. But as much as the homicide cop might desire it, and as much as her "guest" wished she could comply, the story wasn't going to change. Not in the first telling, not in the hundredth. It was crazy and illogical and too damned coincidental to believe, but every bit of it was God's honest truth.

But it wasn't so much the truth that the police wanted, as much as a valid explanation for the disaster. Shit didn't just happen anymore, not in this post-9/11 world—there had to be a reason for everything. And with a disaster of this magnitude, with so many people killed or injured, being a survivor meant becoming a suspect. And being a suspect meant there had to be other people involved: accomplices who must have sabotaged the elevator, whom she was obviously refusing to tell them about; some kind of terrorist organization, maybe a home-grown one, of which she was a member.

That topic had already come up a few times in her ongoing discussion with Montoya. Exactly what such a group might have hoped to accomplish by killing an elevator full of people Allie couldn't begin to imagine. She'd heard one of the other detectives in the squad room outside theorize about a possible destabilization of the Las Vegas economy. After all, who'd want to come here if the hotels were unsafe? But that sounded as much like bullshit as premonitions of doom.

Except Allie's premonition had actually happened; that was the big difference. The fact *that* the elevator itself had tried to crush her when she tried to get off was something the police were apparently willing to ignore. They were more interested in *why* she'd wanted to get off. Maybe, the speculation went, she couldn't go through with the terrorist plan. Maybe dying for whatever cause she supported had suddenly lost its appeal, and realizing she was about to die had caused her to freak out. But if that were true, Allie had contended at one point, then why did she try to convince everyone to get off *with* her?

Montoya had simply shrugged and replied, "I don't know. Guilty conscience?"

So now they were at an impasse: Allie sticking to her story, as absurd as it sounded, and Montoya refusing to lend it any credence. And yet, almost four hours after the accident, the police still hadn't charged Allie with any crime; she was still a "person of interest" in the investigation.

But what exactly did that mean, she wondered, not for the first time. Was it that they didn't have enough evidence to arrest her, other than the statements of the four other survivors, including her husband, who probably didn't understand the situation any better than she? Did it mean they could hold her indefinitely, refusing to let her see anyone, even a lawyer, until she recanted her own statement and started telling them what they wanted to hear?

"I don't see you writing, Mrs Gaines," Montoya said, close to her right ear.

Allie started. She'd been so lost in thought, she hadn't noticed the detective move to her side of the table. Montoya tapped the legal pad, making it clear just how much her patience was wearing thin, and Allie snatched up the pen.

"From the top," Montoya instructed her. "Everything you told me," that unfriendly smile appeared again, "plus anything else you can think of that might pertain to the incident."

Allie knew exactly what that was supposed to mean: Feel free to write down the names of your accomplices, and where we might be able to find them. Don't let me stop you if you'd like to make a full confession.

Fat chance of that ever happening, Allie thought. Who was she going to implicate—the elevator?

As she started writing, repeating her story now in its long form for posterity, there was a sharp knock at the door. Montoya went to answer it, pausing only long enough to point at her suspect and say, "keep writing."

Still, Allie looked up as the door opened. Two men were standing in the next room; no doubt they'd been observing Montoya's line of questioning through the two-way mirror. One of the men was heavyset, maybe in his late fifties, with a thick, brush-like mustache that covered his upper lip. A fringe of thinning grey hair encircled his

skull from one ear to the other, while the top of his head was completely bald and mildly sunburned. It looked like the hair that was missing from the crown hadn't fallen out, just upped stakes and moved down to the insides of his ears, where it had become two small, grotesquely hairy bushes. The other guy, standing just behind the ear man, was about ten years or so younger, but seemed to be working on matching his partner's expanding waistline. He was clean-shaven, though, and still had all his hair in its proper places, so at least he still had something to be proud of. Both wore dark, pinstriped suits, but neither of them looked like cops; more like some kind of official government types, Allie figured. From the unblinking, heated stares they leveled at her, it was pretty clear they probably weren't representatives from the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union.

The larger guy, who appeared to be the one in charge, mumbled something to Montoya. She frowned, obviously displeased with what he had to say. Nevertheless, she stepped aside to let the men into the interrogation room. As he approached Allie, Ear Man reached into his jacket and came out with a thin wallet that he flipped open with practised precision. Allie had just enough time to mentally register the badge, and a photo identification card with the big letters "FBI" next to the picture, before he snapped the wallet closed and put it away.

"Mrs Gaines," he said in a surprisingly light tone, "my name is Special Agent Hotz, of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Las Vegas Center." He gestured toward the other man. "This is my partner, Agent McGavin."

"How do you do?" Allie asked him, in a voice sounding hollow to her own ears. She didn't really care how it sounded, actually; she was just being polite.

McGavin, hands folded in front of his body, nodded silently. A regular chatterbox, Allie thought wryly.

Hotz nodded toward the two-way mirror. "We've been listening to what you've told Detective Montoya," he continued, smiling pleasantly, "and, quite frankly... well, you might find this hard to believe, but we think you're full of shit."

The end of that comment took Allie completely by surprise. It was delivered in a hard-edged, accusatory tone, and the easy smile had seamlessly transformed into a menacing baring of his teeth. She suddenly had the disturbing notion that, if Montoya was the opening act, then the main event was about to begin.

Hotz dropped himself into the chair on the opposite side of the table, and slid up to the edge as far as his paunch would allow. He placed both hands, palms down, on the tabletop, and glared at Allie. "In about ten minutes, another agent is going to walk in here with a video camera, at which point we'll start recording your confes—" The false smile resurfaced. A little Freudian slip there, it seemed. "Your *statement* on tape. Now, you can tell the Las Vegas authorities all about psychic warnings and killer elevators until you're blue in the face, and maybe they'll even believe you. This fucking town is already a circus, what's one more act, right?"

Allie looked past the agents. Montoya, still by the door, was seething, her face red with anger at that remark. Whether Hotz was aware of her reaction, or just didn't give a damn if she even had one, was another matter.

"But," Hotz growled, "this is a *federal* investigation now, honey."

Allie blinked in surprise. Honey? "Excuse me?" she snapped.

"*Quiet!*" Hotz bellowed. "This fairy tale bullshit you keep throwing around might amuse the fuck out of you, maybe because you like playing head games with Las Vegas PD and watching them run around in circles trying to figure you out, but you're dealing with the F-B-goddamn-I now, sweetheart! It *ends*, right here, right this very goddamn second!" He threw a warning index finger in her direction like a dagger. "We want to know what you had to do with that disaster, what you know, what anybody else knows. There are about forty bodies strewn across Las Vegas Boulevard, another fifty people injured, and maybe a couple million dollars in property damage."

He leapt to his feet, and jammed his finger right up close to her face. Allie gasped, and drew back in shock.

"And so help me, God," he roared, "you *are* gonna tell us the truth, little girl, or you're gonna be spending a *very* long time in the darkest fucking *hole* the United States government can drop you in!"

"How's it coming?" Warren asked.

Izzy shrugged, then nodded her head back toward the interrogation room. "What, you can't hear for yourself?" Even as she voiced the question, Hotz's belligerent tone could be heard through the closed door.

Warren grinned, and reached up to tap his earlobes. "I have a special neurological condition. My hearing naturally shuts out FBI bullshit. It's kinda like learning to tune out a car alarm when you're trying to sleep."

Izzy raised a quizzical eyebrow. "And the department recognizes that as some sort of disability?"

"Nah," he replied, his grin widening. "As an advantage."

She chuckled and looked over to Shawna, who was sitting beside Warren at his desk in the middle of the squad room; Izzy's desk faced his. "Honestly, Shawna, I don't know how you put up with him," she said and winked.

"We have an agreement," Shawna replied with a smile. "He doesn't try out his lame material on me, and I don't embarrass him by popping out of a cake at any of the department retirement parties."

Warren sighed melodramatically. "Yeah, and you wouldn't believe how much I'm hated because of that."

"Oh, I can believe it," Shawna replied nonchalantly.

"I see," Izzy said. "So I get to be the one stuck with being his audience for eight or ten hours a day."

Shawna shrugged. "Somebody has to, I guess." Now it was her turn to wink.

"Yeah," Izzy agreed. She paused, then turned to Warren. "So, how are you holding up?"

The walls of the squad room fairly shook as Hotz unleashed another verbal outburst.

"Better than *her*," Warren said, gesturing toward the interrogation room. He looked at his watch. "Christ. Close to an hour he's been grilling her, and from the way he's screaming I'd say it's a sure bet

she's still not budging on that psychic story. He keeps this up, we're gonna have to call the EMTs when his heart explodes."

"That's why I finally had to walk out," Izzy confessed. "With all the bullying he's been doing since they started rolling tape, I was starting to feel sorry for that girl. And I think her story stinks as much as *he* does."

"But what if it really *is* true?" Shawna offered. "I mean, haven't there been documented cases of people who went through something like what she says happened to her? A premonition that warned them about something bad that was about to take place? Wasn't there a story on the news a few years ago about some plane crash in New York?"

"I think you've been watching too many of those cable TV documentaries, honey," Warren quipped. "Didn't you mention one last week that was about psychic detectives? Maybe that's what put the idea in your head."

She looked at him sternly, and Warren could almost feel the heat coming off her eyes. "No, it did not 'put the idea in my head.' And it was about the Apocalypse, not psychic detectives."

He held up his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay. It was just a suggestion."

She turned to Izzy. "Look, we've all had them at one time or another, even if we didn't know what they were—you know what I mean?"

Izzy looked contemplative for a couple of seconds. "I think I do," she replied hesitantly.

"Like back on September eleventh," Shawna added. "There were all those stories that came out days later about people who never made it to work at the World Trade Center because they'd left the house a little later than normal, or decided to run an errand; something that messed up their normal routines, and made them just late enough to miss being there when the planes hit."

"You know, there's a word for that," Warren commented dryly. "It's called *coincidence*."

"All of those people being late for work on the same day?" Shawna replied. "That was just a coincidence?"

Warren flashed what he knew probably looked to her like a condescending smile. "What, you want me to believe that hundreds of people all got it into their heads, all on the *same morning*, that they suddenly needed to do something different that would slow their commute to work for an extra ten or fifteen minutes? You're saying that every one of them knew what was coming?"

"No," she replied hotly. "The ones I saw interviewed on TV all admitted they didn't know *why* they'd left the house late, just that it happened. They couldn't explain it."

"So, you think they had some sort of advance warning?" Izzy asked. "Some kind of psychic flash telling them to avoid the Twin Towers?" Warren frowned. She didn't sound as skeptical now as she had a minute ago.

Shawna shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe it's just that they weren't supposed to die that day."

"So *God* warned them off?" he said, not even bothering to hide the sarcastic tone that edged his voice. The Lord could certainly be a choosy SOB when He wanted to be, couldn't He, Warren thought? Step in to give the heads-up to a few hundred people one minute, look the other way while a kid like Danny Lavirra was getting the shit beaten out of him the next. Some cosmic balance, huh?

"I didn't say that," Shawna replied.

"Look, if what you're saying is true," Izzy conceded, then glared at Warren with a shut-the-hell-up expression, "and I'm not saying it is, there's a big difference between folks being late for work and what Allie Gaines told me she experienced. According to her, it went a lot further than just a bad feeling. She says she saw the entire incident play out right in front of her. That she was able to see everything that was going to happen inside the elevator, right up to and including her own death."

"That's what she told me, too, on the way down to the lobby," Warren said. It had been a long, exhausting walk down the fire stairs from the 115th floor once the rest of the Tower's elevators had been shut off for safety reasons, and Allie had been quite detailed in her description of what she'd seen in her vision. Or whatever it was. Warren was half convinced she'd nodded off and dreamed up the

whole thing. Maybe. After all, she didn't look like the type who'd make for a credible terrorist, and the only criminal record they'd been able to dig up on her was a bunch of DUIs and a few public intoxication arrests from back in college. And the most serious charge they'd found on her husband, Tom, was an outstanding parking ticket from thirteen months ago.

But really, who could tell with people these days, right? The news was filled with stories of normal-looking men and women who often turned out to be serial killers, or who just got it in their heads one day to pick up a gun and go shoot a bunch of customers at a fast-food restaurant. What was that old line? It's always the quiet ones you have to look out for.

Being quiet was about the last thing Tom Gaines had on his mind.

"Where's my wife, goddamn it?" he bellowed, and kicked at the bars of the holding cell in frustration. "Somebody give me a fuckin' answer!"

"Uh... you really shouldn't do that," said Ploog from his reclining position on the sole cot. "It's not a good idea. It just makes the cops mad when you start kicking their property."

Tom wheeled to face him. "Yeah?" he snapped.

"Yeah," Ploog replied matter-of-factly. He held up his right hand, then slowly turned it to the left, like he was adjusting the volume control on a stereo. "And you should maybe dial down that attitude a few levels, too. Yelling only gets them to ignore you twice as hard."

"Oh? Had a few run-ins with the cops in your time?" Tom asked. He didn't really need to ask, he figured. One look at this guy, with his crappy suit and weasely demeanor, made it pretty clear the Vegas cops probably knew him on sight. He was either a drug dealer or a drunk, with a rap sheet as long as the cot on which he was stretched out. What a guy like that was doing in a place like The Lady of the Lake... well, that was anybody's guess.

"A couple," Ploog admitted. He eyed his cellmate suspiciously for a moment, then smiled knowingly. "Not as many as *you* probably

think, though."

That brought Tom up short. For a skeev, Ploog seemed to be a pretty perceptive guy... kinda like Allie, in a skanky, loser way. Or maybe it was just that the entire world was good at reading Tom's emotions, and he'd never noticed it before. He frowned. He *really* needed to work on his poker face.

"So, if you're smart," Ploog continued, "you'll listen to the voice of reason here and stop making trouble."

"Making trouble?" Tom replied. He gestured at the three brick walls and barred door that surrounded them. "I'd say this looks like a shitload of trouble already. I don't have to *make* any."

"Okay," Ploog agreed. "So stop making any *more*."

Tom crossed his arms and leaned against the bars. "This is bullshit," he said huffily. "They've got no right to lock us up. We didn't do anything."

Ploog grunted and stared at the ceiling. "Your wife starts screaming how the elevator she's in is gonna crash and everybody with her is gonna die—and then it does, right after she gets off." He grimaced. "I don't know... Sounds kinda suspicious to me."

"You got off, too!" Tom snapped.

Ploog looked at him and smiled. "Hey, I'm just pointing out what it looks like to the cops. It's not like I don't appreciate what your lady did." His expression suddenly turned serious. "And I do appreciate it, man. I mean, they'd be scraping me up as street pizza right about now if she hadn't done what she did."

"Thanks," Tom replied. Maybe the guy wasn't all bad, he considered. "I just wish I knew exactly what that *was*, what she did."

Ploog nodded. "Yeah, it's kinda freaky, when you really think about it. You gotta admit, it doesn't make a whole lotta sense, what we went through."

Tom smiled weakly. "Yeah, you're right." He sagged against the bars and sighed, suddenly feeling very tired. Maybe the shock of the disaster was starting to wear off, he thought, and the adrenalin charge he'd been living on for the past few hours had run its course.

"So, relax," Ploog said pleasantly, as though he could tell what Tom was feeling. He sat up, and patted the cot's mattress. "Have a seat.

Stop kickin' the fixtures. Give it a couple more hours, tops, and you'll be back on the street before you know it."

It was more like four hours, and then it was only to walk from the holding cell to a drab interrogation room on the second floor. That's where it was explained to Tom that he had to undergo another round of questioning, this time with some short-tempered FBI agent named Hotz and his silent partner.

Hotz looked like he was about to have a stroke by the time he sat down with Tom in the interrogation room, his face so red the top of his bald head almost resembled the flashing light on top of a police car. Tom had to cover his mouth to hide the smile that was forming, because there was only one thing he could think of that could make someone *that* flustered.

Allie.

"All right, Mr Gaines," Hotz began. "Despite my best efforts to make clear to your wife just how much trouble she's facing, she apparently refuses to change her ridiculous story."

Tom bit his bottom lip to stifle the laugh that was trying to force its way out. That was his girl, all right-stubborn to a fault. Back her into a corner, and she was only going to get even more stubborn.

"So, let's see if you and I can do better," Hotz concluded.

"I'm certainly willing to try," Tom said pleasantly. "By the way, where is my wife?"

"I believe they moved her down to Holding," Hotz replied. "Detective Montoya is getting her something to eat." He paused. "Would you care for some food? Coffee, perhaps?"

"I'm good," Tom said. "I'll get something when we get out of here." He raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Do you know when that might be?"

"You're talking about being released?" Hotz smiled. It was a neat trick, Tom thought, the way the guy could find the perfect balance of bared teeth that made him look both friendly *and* menacing. "Well, there's nothing to release you *from*, Mr Gaines. Neither of you have been formally charged with any crimes."

Tom pushed his chair back from the table and stood up. "Then you mean we're free to go?" He glanced over to the other agents in the room: Hotz's partner, and a blonde woman in charge of a video camera. "I could walk out of here right now, and you wouldn't try to stop me?" From the stone-faced expressions they both presented, it was pretty clear Tom wouldn't get more than two steps toward the door before they'd knock him on his ass and cuffed him to the chair.

"In a manner of speaking, yes, you could," Hotz replied. Tom turned back to face him; that pitbull grin was still bolted onto the man's jowls. "Trust me, Mr Gaines, I know exactly how anxious you are to leave. It's quite understandable. Were I in your position, I wouldn't want to hang around a police station, answering questions for hours on end, either. Especially not after going through such a traumatic experience as you did last night. But we're hoping you could answer just a few more questions before you do." He gestured toward Tom's chair. "Please?"

Tom stared at him for a moment, then at the other agents. He sighed, and dropped heavily into the seat. "Fine," he said huffily. "But didn't you people already read the statement I gave the detectives?"

"I did, and it was very helpful," Hotz said. "But I'd like to hear it for myself. You know how it can be when something is written down; there's always the chance some comments can be taken out of context."

Tom switched on his own false smile. "Like all that weapons of mass destruction talk before the invasion?"

Hotz's short, mirthless laugh sounded like a cat with consumption trying to cough up a hairball . "Oh, that's right," he said with a nod. "You voted Democrat in the last election." He sighed, and looked at Tom with a bored expression. "Have a little problem with the way your government does business, Mr Gaines?"

"*My* government?" Tom said, slightly amused. "No. Just with some of the people running it."

"Well, maybe you'll do better next time around," Hotz said dryly. He turned to the female agent and nodded. She flicked a switch on the video camera to start recording the session. Hotz then opened a

black leather folder that lay on the table by his left hand, and began thumbing through a thin stack of reports. He selected one and took a few seconds to read over it. Tom recognized the handwriting on it as his own: it was his written statement.

"All right," Hotz began. "Now, according to what you told the police, you and your wife were taking the elevator down to your room on the..."

"Twenty-fifth floor," Tom answered.

Hotz nodded without looking up from the paper. "Right. And had she exhibited any sort of... unusual behavior while you were dining?"

Tom stared at him for a few seconds, aware of how confused his expression must appear to the agent. "Unusual? Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know," Hotz replied. "Was she acting nervous or jittery? Did she seem short of breath? Did she seem distracted at any point, like her mind was on something else? That kind of thing."

Tom shook his head. "No."

"Was she constantly looking around, or at her watch?"

"Well, I know she kept looking over at Detective Ackerman every now and then," Tom admitted.

Hotz looked up, suddenly showing a definite interest. "Oh? Do you think she recognized him as a police officer?"

Another head shake. "Nah. She thought he was some creep verbally abusing his girlfriend."

"And what gave her that impression?"

"Cause the girl was crying." Tom smiled. "Allie doesn't care much for jackass boyfriends. Makes her start acting like an overprotective big sister sometimes." He shrugged. "Anyway, we didn't even know he was a cop until he identified himself in the elevator."

"After your wife..." Hotz paused to consult the report again "...freaked out, as you put it?"

"Uh... yeah." Tom winced. Had he really been stupid enough to write that down? It made it sound like Allie acted like a nutjob. Well, if he were lucky, she'd never find out about her husband's poor choice of words.

"And did your wife exhibit any unusual behavior once you got on the elevator?"

Tom had to think about it for a moment. "I'm not sure," he had to admit. "I mean, we got on and moved to the back, so we could look out the windows. But as soon as we got there, she kinda... blanked out."

"Blanked out?" Hotz asked. "Could you elaborate on that?"

"Well, she just..." Tom pinwheeled his hands, trying to come up with the proper description. He failed. "Just blanked out. Her eyes got real big. He widened his own, imitating the wall-eyed expression he'd seen on his wife's face. "You know? And she kinda just froze up and started staring into space."

"Did she say anything?" Hotz asked. "Do anything?"

"No, she just stood there, not saying a word," Tom explained. "Until that guy, Ploog, bumped into her. That's when she started, uh..."

"Freaking out," Hotz concluded.

"Yeah," Tom said sheepishly.

"Maybe it was some kind of signal," McGavin suddenly remarked.

Tom almost jumped out of his chair. The agent had been standing so quietly, for such a long period of time, he'd started to think the guy was a department store dummy instead of a real person.

Hotz grunted. "Ploog nudges Gaines to let her know it's time to put the plan into motion."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Tom demanded. "Are you trying to say my wife was part of some conspiracy to crash the elevator?"

Hotz shot him a warning glance. "Calm yourself, Mr Gaines. Agent McGavin was merely voicing a hypothesis."

"Based on what?" Tom shot back. "That you think Allie might be some kid of terrorist?"

"Terrorist." Hotz eyed him suspiciously. "I never used that word, Mr Gaines. What made *you* think of it just now?"

"Because that's what you're here looking for, isn't it?" Tom replied. "You're already sure the elevator didn't fall off the building because of some mechanical problem, so there had to be somebody responsible. And since Allie's the one who tried to warn us about it, and she's the one the cops got their eye on, it only makes sense *you'd*

be looking at her as a terrorist." He paused to take a breath. "Besides," he added in a more subdued tone, "I overheard the detectives talking about it." He threw his hands up in the air. "Jesus Christ, this is nuts! We never even met Ploog until we got on the goddamn elevator. We only came here to do some gambling and check out the sights."

"And whose idea was it?" Hotz asked. "To come to Las Vegas, I mean."

"Well, it was Allie," Tom replied.

"And who chose Merlin's Tower for your stay?"

"She did. It was part of some package deal she found at an online travel agency." Tom spread his hands in a pleading gesture. "Look, what does any of that have to do with—"

"And how far in advance did she make the plans for this trip?" Hotz continued.

He shrugged. "Not long. It was a spur-of-the-moment thing."

"Uh-huh," was all Hotz said in reply.

It took Tom a couple of seconds for the implication to sink in. "Oh, now wait a minute," he began.

"It was also her idea to dine at the Lady of the Lake restaurant, wasn't it, Mr Gaines?"

"Oh, come on!" Tom said in despair.

"Wasn't it?" Hotz repeated.

"Yes!" Tom replied. "She... thought it'd be a good place for us to talk."

"About what?"

Tom hesitated. Jesus, did these fuckers have to know *everything*?

"About *what*, Mr Gaines?" Hotz asked, a bit more forcefully this time.

"Marital problems," Tom said slowly. "We, uh... we only got married the day before yesterday."

"Ah," said Hotz. "Congratulations." The sarcastic tone in his voice was hard to miss. "And did you work them out?"

"Yeah," Tom mumbled. "I guess we did." Not that you give a shit, you fat bastard, he thought.

Well, that's good to hear," Hotz said dryly. "Sometimes getting through the honeymoon can be the hardest part of the marriage." He returned Tom's statement to the pile and shuffled his papers into a neat stack. "Was there anything else you discussed while you were having dinner? Anything that isn't in your report?"

Tom sneered at him. "What, now you think maybe *I* was in on it, too?"

Hotz showed his own teeth. "Let's get one thing straight, Mr Gaines," he said tersely. "*I'm* the one who asks the questions. You don't; you're the one who *answers* them. But I will tell you this: If you thought for a single second that the possibility you're mixed up in this only occurred to me now, while we've been talking, then you're even less intelligent than your college grade point average lets on." He smiled knowingly, and patted the stack of reports in his folder.

Tom pointed at the pile in shock. "You've got that in there, too?"

"All that and more," Hotz replied. He looked to the female agent, who turned off the camera, then turned back to Tom. "We're the FBI, Mr Gaines," he growled. "I can tell you what you had for dinner a month ago Thursday... or when the last time was that you and some of your buddies tried rewiring a cable box to get a pay-per-view event you didn't want to pay for. It's all part of the shared information network that's been established with the other agencies, CIA, NSA, Department of Defense, to help combat the threat of terrorism in the United States." He smiled broadly, maliciously. "A security network designed to protect your life and the lives of every other person in this country, set up by the very government you have problems with." He paused, as though suddenly reminded of something. "Oh, that's right. Your problem's not with the government, just with some of the people running it." The smile widened. "I imagine by now you've added me to that list, correct?"

Tom grunted, and settled for staring back at him in stony silence rather than answer. Besides, why bother telling the smug bastard what he obviously already knew?

Hotz gestured to the female agent, and she turned the camera back on. "So, getting back to where we left off, Mr Gaines," he said, all

business again. "Is there anything you'd like to tell me now that you didn't tell the police, or include in your statement?" The false grin flashed beneath the thick mustache. "And please, take your time. *I* certainly plan to."

FOURTEEN

At 1:30 that afternoon, an unmarked van containing the five survivors pulled away from the rear entrance of Metro Police Headquarters, bound for Merlin's Tower.

For Warren, Shawna, and Ploog, it was so they could retrieve their cars. Shawna also needed to find out what was going on with *Magipalooza!*, since it had been announced on the news that the hotel was going to be closed until a veritable army of structural engineers had inspected the Tower from top to bottom. Bad enough an elevator had sheared away from one side; it would be even worse if there was a possibility the entire building might collapse.

For Allie and Tom, it was so they could gather up their belongings and relocate to another hotel; a less expensive, far less impressive one, since the city had offered to pick up the tab. Allie would have preferred just cutting the trip short and flying back to Illinois, but Special Agent Hotz had made it quite clear that she and her husband weren't going anywhere... yet.

"Maybe I don't have enough evidence to hold you two," he'd commented, "but until I see a report that states, without a shadow of a doubt, that the accident *was* just an accident, you're not leaving this city."

Hotz hadn't planned on letting them go at all, but after Tom had loudly, and frequently, demanded to see a lawyer because his civil rights were being violated, the questioning had ground to a halt. And since that request had been captured on videotape, and been heard by every cop in the homicide squad room, it was a little difficult to ignore. So, for the time being, they were free to go, although there was no doubt the FBI would have them under some kind of surveillance.

The ride to the Tower was supposed to be a short, uneventful trip. But as the van turned the corner of police headquarters, the "Merlin Five" (as the news reports referred to them) found themselves driving into the midst of a media circus. Somehow, word had gotten out (no doubt through a leak in the department) and an army of

reporters had set up camp on Stewart Avenue to cover the story. They swarmed around the van, Nikons flashing, video cameras recording, questions screaming to be heard, microphones being shoved at the rolled-up windows in case one of the group members had something memorable to say for the six o'clock news. It took a couple dozen uniformed officers to push the crowd back behind the barricades that had been set up on the street, but the enforced relocation did nothing to lower the decibel level of the questions shouted, or the number of camera lenses trained on the group.

Finally, though, the sidewalk was cleared in a wide enough area for the van to make it onto the street proper, where the driver made a left-hand turn. Accompanied by sector cars in front and behind it, and state troopers riding mammoth motorcycles on both sides of it, the van rolled past the main post office and City Hall, heading for Las Vegas Boulevard.

For Warren, getting past that sea of reporters was the closest he'd ever gotten to experiencing a "perp walk" from the criminal's point of view, and as close as he ever *wanted* to get. He'd been on the other side of the situation often enough during his career; so often, in fact, he pretty much considered it part of the job. It was a regular public relations event where arresting officers would walk a suspect out of the station and past the throngs of reporters to a waiting car. It was done as a courtesy of sorts, to give the press an opportunity to do exactly what they were doing to Warren and the others: scream and yell and practically trip over one another to get a good shot or a catchy sound bite. Taking that short stroll from front door to car door had never bothered Warren before, but then he tended to be the guy who led the prisoner, not the prisoner himself.

And after almost twelve hours of answering questions about what had been dubbed "The Strip Maul Disaster" by one of the local papers, a prisoner was exactly who Warren felt like. How they all felt, actually. Shawna had been the only one to admit that to him, but it was clear from the exhausted, saddened expressions on the faces of the other three survivors that they probably wouldn't disagree. Getting worked over by the FBI hadn't helped lessen that feeling, either; even Warren had come to despise the apparent sadistic gusto

with which Hotz tore into his witnesses. Grilling Allie Gaines to the point of making her break down in tears at one point, before she eventually got her second wind and started giving him shit back, was expected, and not beyond anything Warren himself would have done to get answers.

It was when Hotz had set his sights on *him* that his attitude began to change. To try and bully a fellow law enforcer—a decorated officer who'd busted his ass to earn his gold detective's shield—with threats about ruining his life and career, and then to imply he might have been one of Gaines's accomplices... well, that was stepping over the goddamn line. Not that Warren hadn't been waiting for something like that to happen. Five people jumping off an elevator seconds before it crashes was mighty suspicious looking, and he'd known the FBI would come at him, at all of them, hard. This wasn't some fender-bender on the Maryland Parkway, or an altercation after a concert at the Hard Rock Café. Somebody had to be held accountable for all those deaths and all that property damage, and whether the cause of it was manmade or mechanical, the responsible party or parties had to be found, and fast.

It was just that maybe the Feds were barking up the wrong tree. As he looked at the rest of the group, it became harder to believe there could be a murderous saboteur among them. And by "them" he meant Ploog and the Gaineses. Shawna he'd discounted immediately as a killer; she couldn't even stand to see animals suffering on those wildlife shows she was always watching. Hell, the sight of little baby dinosaurs getting eaten by a bigger dinosaur on some special PBS was running last month had even made her cry, and those things were all computer-created special effects! And if she couldn't bear to watch imaginary animals dying.

Well, all right, maybe she wouldn't mind seeing the panther that had come at her yesterday get what it deserved. But that was understandable. Everybody had their exceptions.

As for Ploog, the guy looked too jittery to be a terrorist. Putting him in charge of wrecking an elevator was like asking Scooby Doo to build an atomic bomb. It wouldn't have taken long before he accidentally dropped a monkey wrench on the core and blew himself

and all of Mayberry to shit. Of course, with Ploog it could just be an act, and maybe underneath that fish-eyed loser exterior lurked a criminal mastermind capable of destroying the entire city.

Or not. Warren had gotten a look at Ploog's arrest record; he was about as boringly typical a bottom-feeder as they came, and probably more harmful to himself than to others. Although, Warren now remembered, he *had* admitted he used to do elevator maintenance, so he'd have the knowledge required to screw with the car's mechanics. It was definitely something to keep in mind.

Tom Gaines didn't seem the killing type, either; no history of violent behavior, no major arrests. And from what Warren had observed in the time since the incident, it seemed pretty evident that the wife was the one in charge, which made Gaines more of a follower than a leader. She wanted to take the trip, she was the one who proposed marriage; he just shrugged and went along with it. That, to Warren, meant he was fairly easygoing, more of a thinker than a doer, but again, that could all be an act, like with Ploog. It probably wasn't, though. Tom Gaines was one of those guys who went through life barely making a ripple on the surface, easily coerced into doing things because he didn't want to rock the boat. It was the kind of attitude that would make him the perfect fall guy if the situation required one.

Allie Goodwin-Gaines was the hard one to figure out. Crying one minute, belligerent the next, her mood swings apparently had as many ups and downs as the roller coaster on top of the Stratosphere. Her behavior had certainly kept Hotz on his toes; another ten minutes with her, and he would have either shot her or keeled over dead from a heart attack. Nothing he'd said, no matter how threatening it was or how loudly he yelled it, could get her to back down from her crazy premonition story. She had a strong will, that girl; strong enough to take on an FBI agent and come out the other side still in one piece. It was almost admirable.

She also had an arrest record longer than her husband's, most of the incidents involving drunk and disorderly charges. The last one had happened a few years ago, but up until then she'd apparently been quite the party-girl. And then there was a brief mention he'd

come across in the report about some psychological trauma, but then he'd had to hide it when Hotz stomped back into the squad room to say they were all being released.

Well, it probably didn't matter. Besides, as a witness, Warren shouldn't have been allowed to see the other survivors' records, or their statements, even if he was a cop. Privileged information, and all that other bullshit. But what was a partner for if they didn't look out for you once in a while, right?

He looked up to the van's front passenger seat, where Izzy was sitting. She was on her cell phone, talking softly to someone; maybe it was Charlie, or one of their kids. She thanked the other person and closed the phone.

"What's going on, Izzy?" he asked.

"That was Bradstreet," she replied. One of the other detectives who'd been sitting in Carolina Lavirra's apartment, Warren remembered. "One of the sector cars thought they spotted Roberto Diaz yesterday around 6:00pm, walking around New York Avenue, but he gave them the slip. They figure he ducked into one of the stores there until they'd passed."

In the rear-view mirror, Warren noticed Ploog's head jerk in Izzy's direction and his eyes widen. The little twitcher was sitting behind Warren and Shawna, in the last of the van's three rows of seats; the Gaineses were in the row ahead of them.

"You got something to say, Ploog?" Warren asked, still watching the reflection.

"H-huh?" Ploog stuttered. "N-no. What makes you say that, Detective?"

Warren turned around in his seat to face him. "Because you started acting real nervous when my partner mentioned this guy we've been looking for. A real hardcase." His eyes narrowed. "You work on New York Avenue, don't you?"

"Yeah," Ploog answered, nodding his head a little too much. "Big Apple Laundromat. I handle the second shift."

Warren scratched his jaw in contemplation. "Second shift... That's what, five in the afternoon to 1:00am?"

"Uh-huh," Ploog said slowly.

"Well, maybe you saw this guy Diaz around... What time was it, Izzy?" He spoke to his partner, but his eyes never left Ploog. The rumpled loser had his full attention, and that seemed to make him even more nervous.

"Around six," Izzy replied.

Warren nodded. "Around six. So, you could've spotted him going by. Or maybe yours was even the store he ducked into when that sector car rolled down the street."

Ploog shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant, but he was avoiding making any eye contact. "Maybe. A lot of people come in to do their laundry."

"True," Warren agreed, "but I doubt this guy was looking to wash a bunch of clothes."

"Well... okay," Ploog said. "What did he look like?"

"He's Mexican, about five-ten, built like a refrigeration unit," Warren replied. "Got a mustache like Pancho Villa. Uses a lotta styling mousse to keep his hair back. Has a really nasty temper."

Now, Ploog's eyes were big as coasters. "W... what did he do?" he croaked.

Warren hesitated, and glanced at Shawna. After her near miss with the panther, he hadn't been able to bring himself to start talking about his cases at dinner last night, especially the one involving Danny Lavirra. But now he was stuck inside a van, with her sitting right next to him, and there was no way to avoid the issue. "He's a... suspect in a homicide investigation," he finally said.

"Who'd he kill?" Ploog asked quietly. He was trembling a little; maybe the guy needed a drink, and he was starting to go through the DTS.

"I didn't say he killed anybody," Warren snapped. "We just want to talk to him."

"But he must've had *something* to do with it," Ploog said, "or he wouldn't have..." His voice suddenly trailed off.

Son of a bitch, Warren thought. The squirrelly little bastard is holding out on me.

"Wouldn't have *what*, Arlen?" he demanded. "Wouldn't have ducked into your store when he saw the officers?" He pointed an

accusatory finger at him. "You saw him; I'd bet a body part on it. He *did* come into the laundromat, right?"

"Yeah," Ploog whispered. He coughed to clear his throat. "He came in around six, but he didn't stay long."

"Why was that?" Izzy asked.

Ploog stared at his hands, massaging the knuckles on his left hand with his right thumb, then repeating the action on his right hand with his left thumb. Over and over again in a constant cycle.

"Detective Montoya asked you a question, Arlen," Warren said through gritted teeth. "She's not gonna repeat it."

"Hey!" Allie suddenly popped in. "Why don't you leave him alone? We've all been through a—"

Warren whipped his head around to face her. "Keep your mouth shut and mind your own business, Mrs Gaines," he warned. "You've got a mountain of shit of your own to dig out of; I suggest you worry about that, and not about whether I'm treating Mr Ploog with enough respect."

She didn't seem ready to back down, though. "Yeah? Well, what's so important about the guy you're looking for that—"

"He killed a kid, all right?" Warren snapped. Allie practically jumped out of her seat, and he heard Shawna gasp beside him. Shit, he thought. Well, there ya go, boy. Everything's out in the open now.

"*Maybe* killed a kid," he said in a calmer tone. "That's why we need to find him. If he's innocent, then fine, he's a witness and we have to get his statement. See what kind of leads he can provide so we can locate the killer. But if he's the one who did it..."

"Then what?" Allie asked with a sneer. "You catch him and he gets the death penalty?"

That caught him by surprise. Oh, God, he thought with a silent groan. I'm locked up in a van with a fuckin' bleeding heart liberal.

"The victim was ten years old, Mrs Gaines," Izzy replied.

"Oh my God," Shawna whispered. She looked to Warren. "Is that what you're working on now?"

He nodded. "I was gonna tell you about it last night, but then you had that thing with the panther, and..." He shrugged. "It just didn't

seem like a good idea to talk about it over dinner. And then after that..." He let his voice trail off. He didn't need to explain it further.

"You didn't answer me, Detective Ackerman," Allie said. "Would he get the death penalty?"

Christ, Warren thought, if she's so fucking psychic, can't she figure that out herself?

"Maybe," he replied. "I don't know; that'd be up to a jury." He gestured at himself and Izzy. "We just catch the bastards; we don't sentence them."

She frowned. "And is that what you'd consider justice—that 'eye for an eye' shit? Kill him because he killed a child?"

"Not so much 'an eye for an eye', Mrs Gaines," he replied, and smiled wryly. "I'd call it 'restoring the cosmic balance'"

And that was the point when all hell broke loose.

There was no warning of impending danger, no hint that anything might be out of the ordinary. One moment, the van and its police escort were motoring along Las Vegas Boulevard past Bridger Avenue, heading south. The next, a set of traffic lights that hung over the intersection broke loose and slammed into the left side of the vehicle.

The driver, a young cop named Sean Murphy, who'd introduced himself to the group back at the police station, died on impact, right before Allie's eyes, in a shower of blood and broken metal and shattered glass. The edge of the foremost metal signal cut right through his door and windshield, and right through him. He didn't even have time to scream, but Allie did, as his torso bounced off the ceiling of the van, then into Detective Montoya's lap. Blood sprayed everywhere, and Allie let go an unholy screech as it splashed hotly across her face.

She wasn't the only one screaming, of course. It was just that hers were the loudest, at least to her own ears.

The van careened out of control, swerving to the right, then to the left, where a cry of surprise was cut short by a horrible thump,

followed by an awful-sounding crash. Allie remembered the motorcycle cop who'd been riding alongside as part of the procession; it sounded like he'd been side-swiped by the van. God, I hope he's okay, she thought.

The vehicle continued across the boulevard, to bounce off three or four other vehicles, Allie couldn't tell how many, not being able to see, before roaring back into the southbound lanes. Allie felt every collision as she frantically wiped at her face with her bare hands, part of her grateful Murphy had insisted she wear her seatbelt, part of her wondering what had possessed her to wear a sleeveless dress to dinner last night.

Clearing the blood that covered her eyelids, Allie was able to see Montoya slumped in her seat, either unconscious or dead. Murphy, whose arms had wrapped around her neck in a macabre embrace, looked about as shocked as Allie felt, his eyes wide with apparent disbelief that he could have died in such a bizarre manner.

As the van swerved again, Allie looked to the steering wheel. Jesus Christ! she thought. There's nobody driving this thing!

Instinctively, she looked to Tom, who was sitting directly behind the driver's seat, to see if he could help. But her husband was sitting motionless, and blood was seeping down along the left side of his face from a nasty gash across the temple. He'd been struck by something when the traffic lights hit that side of the van, and for a second, she thought he was dead.

"Tom?" she said. "*Tom!*" She shook him, and he moaned. Allie breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, thank God," she whispered. He'd be all right, she was certain.

The van lurched again. With no other options available, Allie scrambled to unbuckle her seatbelt, but the damn thing wouldn't come loose—like it was stuck, all of a sudden. She yanked at the restraining strap, clawed at the release mechanism, but nothing worked. It was as though the belt was fighting her efforts to stop the van from crashing.

She glanced up to see where the vehicle was heading. And then her gaze fell on something that her panicked mind found hard to register: the bottom half of Murphy's body, the legs and buttocks,

was still in the driver's seat, and as she watched, the right foot pressed down on the gas pedal.

"Oh my God!" she screamed as the van picked up speed. It rammed into the rear of the police car that was leading the motorcade, the impact sending Allie and the other survivors jolting forward. Allie gasped as the seatbelt tightened across her chest, forcing the air from her lungs. Then she was slapped back against the seat as the van swerved around the police cruiser and accelerated.

It tore down Las Vegas Boulevard, weaving in and out of traffic like it knew where it wanted to go. Allie frantically tore at the seatbelt, pulling it, stretching it, even trying at one point to slide out from under it.

"Oh, God, we're gonna die!" Shawna cried from behind her.

Allie turned around. The girl's face was covered with blood, although it was impossible to tell if it was her own, or just more of Murphy's arterial spray. She looked a little dazed, but not enough that she couldn't recognize the danger they were all in. Beside her, Ackerman was just starting to come around from whatever knock to the head he'd taken.

Allie reached over the seat to shake him. "Detective Ackerman! Wake up!"

A siren blared outside her window. Allie turned to see the remaining motorcycle cop trying to keep pace with the speeding van. She was suddenly struck with the notion that he probably thought they'd commandeered the vehicle, and were trying to make some sort of getaway.

She pounded on the window. "Help us!" she yelled.

Before the state trooper could respond, the van jerked to the right and clipped the front tire of his motorcycle. The bike went spinning out of control and slammed into a parked car. Allie had just enough time to see the cop go flying over the roof of the car before the van crossed the next intersection. Drivers in other vehicles stomped on their brakes and swerved out of the way as the van cut across the lanes of traffic.

Where the hell is it taking us, Allie wondered? Back to the hotel to finish the job?

Ackerman groaned, and Allie shifted around to face him. "Detective Ackerman!"

Shawna reached across the seat to shake him. "Warren! Warren!"

His eyes opened. "Jesus, honey, I'm not deaf." Then he sat bolt upright as the van lurched. "Hey, what's the goddamn rush?"

"There's nobody driving the van!" Allie screamed.

That took a precious second or two to get through his muddled brain, but then he fully came around. He looked at the driver's seat, at what remained of the driver, muttered a terse "Holy shit," then looked to Detective Montoya. "Izzy!" he yelled.

"I think she's unconscious," Allie explained. "Or..."

"Then why aren't you stopping this fuckin' thing?" he demanded.

She pointed toward her lap. "Because I can't get the goddamn buckle to open!"

"Uh, you might wanna try a little harder," Ploog said, and pointed toward the front of the van.

Allie turned around to look at what had gotten his attention. A block ahead of them was the intersection where the Strip and Charleston Boulevard met. And stretched right across the middle of it, in the process of making a left-hand turn onto the boulevard's northbound lanes, was a sixteen-wheeled gas tanker, no doubt filled to the brim with gallon upon gallon of highly flammable fuel.

"Well, I didn't see *that* coming," Allie muttered.

She started pounding on the seatbelt release, like that would do anything to make it open. But then Ackerman grabbed her left shoulder and pushed her to the side, toward Tom. "Cover your ears!" he ordered.

She turned in time to see him lean over her seat with a gun in his hand. "Jesus Christ!" she cried. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Cuttin' you loose!" he answered. "You think I carry a fuckin' Swiss army knife? Now, cover your goddamn ears!"

Allie did as she was told, but it didn't do her hearing much good. The gun roared once, momentarily deafening her, and her nostrils filled with acrid smoke. When she looked down, there was a gaping hole in the seatbelt strap—and in the seat itself.

Ackerman grabbed the material with both hands and started yanking hard on it, trying to tear apart the remaining section of the belt. Allie helped as best she could in her awkward sitting position, and they were rewarded with the sound of the strap beginning to break.

The van suddenly accelerated, as though whatever force was guiding it knew what they were up to, and now it was a race to see who was going to come out of it the winner.

With a final tear of reinforced fabric, the seatbelt a came loose, and Allie dived for the steering wheel. But no matter how hard she tried turning it, the wheel wouldn't budge. The van was locked on its collision course.

She gave up on trying to steer and scrambled to gain control of the brake pedal. She reached down with both hands and grabbed Murphy's right leg by the ankle, then tried yanking it off the accelerator. But the leg muscles were frozen, like rigor mortis had set in, and the foot was still pressing down on the pedal.

"You know, if you're gonna do something," Ploog commented in a surreally calm voice, "this'd be a really good time for it."

"I'm *trying*, goddamn it!" Allie snapped. She looked up from her efforts to glance out through the shattered windshield. The side of the tanker filled her vision.

She looked away from the looming disaster and focused on the job at hand. Putting all her strength into it, she pulled back on the leg and succeeded in sliding it off the gas. Then, with a scream born of desperation and fear, she picked it up and slammed it down on the brake.

The van rolled to a hard stop. Allie looked up as the hood of the vehicle lightly bumped against the wall of the tanker. Then she grabbed the keys on the steering column, switched off the ignition, and killed the van's engine.

"Thank you, God," Shawna whispered from the back.

Allie released her grip on Murphy's leg, not wanting to touch parts of a dead guy any more. But then a loud sloshing sound beneath and around her caught her attention, and she looked down. The top half of Murphy's severed torso, the part that had Detective Montoya

locked in a death embrace, had spilled his guts onto the floor of the van, and now Allie found herself crouching in a pile of colons and liver and pancreas and stomach.

She was in the process of shrieking, when last night's dinner decided to take advantage of her wide-open mouth and evacuate her stomach, spewing what seemed like a never-ending, acidic-tasting torrent of catfish and chocolate and imported beer across the driver seat, the steering wheel, the dashboard. The noxious mixture slid down the black-colored upholstery to the floor, where it mixed with the intestinal juices congealing around her hands and knees in a ghastly stew.

The strength drained out of her, and Allie numbly belched, a mucus bubble containing tiny bits of fish momentarily forming on her lips before silently popping. "Oh, God." she muttered.

Beside her, she heard Tom groan. She looked up to find him touching the left side of his head, then gazing at the blood he found on his fingers, clearly at a loss to understand how it could have gotten there. He turned to stare at her, with that sort of dumb, confused expression that comes over people when they wake up and sense they would have just missed out on something.

"Hey, honey," he said dully. "You look like shit."

She would have laughed, but then some undigested part of yesterday's lunch unexpectedly forced its way up her gullet. Before she could turn her head, the projectile vomiting had recommenced, turning the crotch and right leg of Tom's dress slacks a grotesque shade of yellow-green.

"That makes two of us," Allie said with a weak grin. And belched.

FIFTEEN

"Now, wait just a goddamn minute," Allie said. "Are you gonna stand there and tell me that everything we've just gone through in the past twelve hours *doesn't* strike you as being weird?"

On the opposite side of the hospital waiting room, Ackerman had his back turned to her. His attention was focused more on the candy dispenser that had just eaten his dollar than in answering her questions. That was fine with Arlen; at least it meant the cop wasn't giving him the evil eye every chance he got.

"Well, are you, Detective Ackerman?" Allie demanded. "'Cause if you are, you're only fooling yourself."

Without turning around, Ackerman grunted. "Am I gonna tell you none of this seems weird, Mrs Gaines? No, I'm not." Now he turned to face her. "But if you're trying to convince me there's some real-life *X-Files* bullshit going on, and that some great supernatural force has got it in for us because we ducked out of a fuckin' elevator last night? Not a chance."

"But it wasn't just any elevator, was it?" she shot back. "It was the one we were supposed to be on when it crashed. The one we were supposed to *die* on."

"And so now what?" he asked. "The Grim Reaper's trying to make up for letting us slip through the cracks? Putting everything the way it should be before somebody finds out he filed an incomplete report?"

"Well, *something* was driving that van after Officer Murphy got killed," she countered.

"Oh, that's right," he said sarcastically. "Well, according to you, it was Officer Murphy's legs that were doing the driving."

"No, I said they were working the pedals." She paused, realizing just how ridiculous that must sound. "Besides, none of him was touching the steering wheel, and *that's* what aimed us at that tanker truck."

"Uh-huh," Ackerman replied, clearly unconvinced. "And do you think that... uh... "

"Death?" she offered.

"Whatever," he snapped. "You think... whatever it is you think that might be after us is gonna try again?"

"Of course I do!" she replied sharply. "Don't you get it? When we stepped off that elevator, we were cheating Death from getting all the souls he was supposed to collect in that accident! And now, he's not gonna stop coming after us until he fills that quota!"

"Cheating Death, huh?" Ackerman said wryly. "Well, we sure picked the right town to do it in, didn't we?" He shook his head in mock sadness. "I think that 'premonition' you had has got you seein' angels and devils now, Mrs Gaines. Maybe you oughtta see if the hospital's got a psych ward with an available rubber room."

"Look, Detective. If you need to put it into terms you can feel comfortable with, you can just think of it as..." she smiled wickedly "...restoring the cosmic balance."

Ackerman grinned, and wagged an index finger at her. "Nice wordplay there, Mrs Gaines, turnin' my own words against me. But that doesn't change the fact you're really startin' to bug the shit outta me."

Arlen's stomach rumbled, but he wasn't sure if that was because he was hungry, or because all these brushes with Death he'd been having since yesterday were giving him nervous gas. He'd almost shit himself in the van during the wild ride; maybe he should hit the john again.

He stood up, and Ackerman stopped banging the snack machine to point a warning finger at him. "Hey! Where the fuck do you think you're going?" he demanded.

Arlen jerked a thumb over his shoulder, in the direction of the men's room down the hall. "I gotta go to the can."

Ackerman pointed to the plastic chair Arlen had just vacated. "Put your ass back in that seat. I'm not lettin' you outta my sight; you're the only lead I have to findin' Diaz."

"What?" Arlen couldn't believe what he'd just heard. "Hey, it's not like I know the guy."

"So you say," Ackerman cut in.

This asshole is really startin' to get on my nerves, Arlen thought. "Yeah, I *do* say," he replied. "All he did was come into the laundromat, and..." He paused, wondering how he could best put this without coming across like a pussy. "And then I had to ask him to leave."

Ackerman took one more kick at the base of the machine, but the dispenser didn't seem in the mood to give up anything in return for the dollar it had swallowed. The detective turned back to face Arlen. There was a condescending grin pulling at the corners of his mouth. "You asked *him* to leave," he said, the tone of his voice making it clear he thought Arlen was jerking his chain. "A big Mexican wrestler-type like Diaz. You politely told him to get the hell outta your store, and he just got up and did it without saying a word."

"Something like that," Arlen said slowly.

"Uh-uh," Ackerman countered. "*Nothing* like that."

Arlen's stomach rumbled again. Yeah, it was definitely nervous gas. From the intensity of its burbling, he figured his ass must be on the verge of exploding. "Okay," he conceded. "Maybe there was a little... misunderstanding between the two of us." He pointed toward the bathroom. "Can I go now?"

"Define 'a little misunderstanding,'" Ackerman said, ignoring his plea for relief.

Arlen sighed. There wasn't any other way around it; he had to tell him. Well, he figured, maybe if he spilled his guts (ooh, *there* was a poor choice of words) the goddamned cop would finally let him go take his shit. Before it was too late.

"Okay, okay," he said. "The guy came in around six, all hyper because there was a patrol car rolling by. I could tell right away he was trying to avoid them."

"You could tell how?" Ackerman asked.

Arlen scratched the back of his ear for a couple a seconds, trying to find a way to describe what he'd seen. Then he hit upon it. "You ever seen someone you busted happy to see you, Detective?"

Ackerman shook his head. "No."

"Then you know the look they get when they see you coming," he replied. "*That's* the look Diaz had on his face." From the slow nod

Ackerman gave, it was clear the detective understood what he meant. He paused, not wanting to go any further with his story, but there was no sense in holding anything back. Time to put all the cards on the table, right? "I knew the guy had to be in some major trouble, so I told him he had to leave. That's when he started... hitting me."

That seemed to get Ackerman's interest. "And did you hit him back?"

Arlen smiled nervously. "Uh... no. I'm really not the physical type."

"That's a surprise," Ackerman commented sarcastically. "So, what kept him from twisting your spine into a pretzel?"

"One of the customers pointed out there was a security camera taping our... misunderstanding. He ran out after that."

Ackerman's eyes narrowed. "So, he assaults you. You get it on tape."

"I'm not sure there was any tape in the machine," Arlen mumbled.

"You have witnesses." the detective continued.

"One of them really doesn't understand English," Arlen said sheepishly.

"And you don't call the police to report it," Ackerman said through gritted teeth. "At all?" Agitated, he ran a hand through his hair. "Jesus Christ, we could've picked him up last night, if you'd just said something!" He wheeled around to deliver a savage kick to the candy machine. "Shit!"

A Snickers bar popped off one of the corkscrew wire holders and tumbled into the pick-up slot.

"He said he was gonna come back and kill me if I called the cops," Arlen explained.

"He's wanted for questioning in a murder, you asshole!" Ackerman snapped. "You coulda helped us put him away if you'd just picked up the goddamn phone! He could be across the state border by now!"

"I'm sorry!" Arlen replied. "Shit, how was I supposed to know that?"

"You couldn't have," said a female voice.

They both turned to face Allie. She, in turn, gestured with her thumb to an African-American woman in a white medical coat standing next to her. The woman was in her mid-twenties, with long,

frizzy hair tied back in a pony-tail, and a pair of really attractive legs that Arlen focused on right away. A nice package all around, he thought, even with the lab coat. Too bad she's not Asian.

He remembered her name was Dr Coburn, and she was the Emergency Room head they'd met when they arrived at Valley Hospital Medical Center an hour ago. Coburn had made sure the blood-soaked arrivals were cleaned up and checked out, and provided with temporary clothing. That meant Arlen and his two waiting room companions wound up sitting around in green surgical scrubs, like they were extras on a medical TV show or something, while Ackerman's girlfriend, Allie's husband and Montoya were being attended to.

Luckily for the group and Detective Montoya, it was a trip that hadn't taken very long, since the hospital was located on Shadow Lane, just a few blocks from where the van came to rest on Charleston Boulevard. The two patrol cars that had been part of the motorcade had shown up seconds after Allie had found the brake, and more cops and a couple of ambulances had arrived not long after that. Strangely enough, Arlen and the others had no trouble getting out of their seatbelts once the excitement had ended.

That FBI agent, Hotz, and his silent stooge had dropped by for a while. He'd been pretty sure that Allie's mysterious "accomplices" had tried to spring her—or kill her—before she could tell him anything useful, but Ackerman and the cops who'd witnessed the van's crazy run down the Strip had made it clear that wasn't the case. The thing was, nobody could come up with a plausible explanation for what exactly had happened. Allie had insisted the van had been driving itself, or at least something had been controlling it, but that had sounded almost as crazy as her story about the premonition. Except, of course, that one had actually panned out.

So, Arlen thought, maybe her story about the van wasn't as wild as it seemed. With all the weird shit going on, it probably wouldn't surprise him to find out that Satan himself had been behind the wheel. At least it would explain the nagging feeling he was starting to get that somebody, or some *thing*, was trying to kill them.

"And I'd appreciate it if you gentlemen would continue this discussion in a lower tone of voice, Coburn was saying as Arlen focused on her again. "Or take it outside. This is a hospital, not *Fight Club*."

Arlen mumbled an apology, while Ackerman offered a gruff, "Sorry, doctor."

She turned to the cop. "You're Detective Ackerman, right?"

He nodded, but there was a worried look that now crept into his eyes. "Shawna?"

"She's doing okay," Coburn assured him. "More shaken up than injured; the blood on her was Officer Murphy's."

He smiled. "Well, thank Christ for that." The smile suddenly faltered; apparently, the jackass had realized what his remark must sound like. "I mean, thank Christ she's okay, not about..."

"I know what you mean, detective," Coburn replied. "I've given her a mild sedative to relax her a little. From what she's told me, she hasn't exactly been having the best couple of days."

He grunted. "Yeah, I guess you could say that," he replied sarcastically.

"We're also running an HIV test on her," the doctor continued.

The wry smile looked like had been smashed off Ackerman's face. "Uh... what's that for?" he asked. There was a nervous tone in his voice. "I mean, I know what it's for, but why are you doing one on Shawna?"

"We just want to make sure she's not running any risk of infection," Coburn explained. "Ms Engels told me the blood got in her mouth and nostrils. She requested that we perform the test."

"Oh." Just for a moment, there was a look of relief that flickered through his facial muscles, like he'd just dodged a bullet. Or like maybe now he didn't have a reason to think his girlfriend had been cheating on him. "And how long will it take to find out one way or the other?"

"A few days," Coburn replied. "But I tried to explain to her that the results might be inconclusive. It normally takes anywhere between three and six months for the antibodies to show up in a test. She insisted on it, anyway."

"Six months, huh?" Ackerman gestured at himself and his fellow survivors. "Well, we *all* got Murphy's blood on us, doctor."

"Yes, I know," she said. "And all of you might want to consider having us run the same test. Just to be on the safe side."

Allie nodded, her eyes wide, her bottom lip trembling a little. The kid looked scared. Well, hell, Arlen thought, who could blame her? Next to Montoya, she'd been the one closest to that cop when he got cut in half and started spraying his juices all around, and she'd been the one swimming around in his intestines on the floor of the van. If anybody was gonna get infected with some really nasty shit from Murphy's blood, it was probably gonna be her.

Without realizing it, he took a step back, putting a little more distance between them. Allie, however, caught the movement, and looked at him like he'd just shot her dog. Arlen shifted his attention to staring at a small spot on the waiting room carpet.

"And how's my partner, doctor?" Ackerman asked.

Arlen glanced up to see Coburn consult her clipboard. "Detective Montoya suffered a concussion and lacerations around the head and chest. If that traffic light had swung just a few inches more to the right, she would've suffered the same fate as Officer Murphy."

Ackerman heaved a sigh of relief. "Will she be able to leave? I know her husband and kids are on their way over."

Coburn shook her head. "Not for a few days. I want to keep her for observation, just to make sure there isn't any brain damage."

"Is that a possibility?" Arlen was surprised. For a tough guy, Ackerman looked like he might be on the verge of tears.

"There's always a possibility, detective," the doctor replied calmly, "but I've talked to Detective Montoya, and she seems alert and in full control of her faculties. I wouldn't worry if I were you. It's really just a precaution."

He nodded. "Oh. Okay. Thanks." He looked like a weight had suddenly lifted from his shoulders.

Geez, Arlen wondered. If the guy is that worried about his partner, maybe they got a little thing goin' on the side that his girlfriend doesn't know about. He hadn't seen much of Montoya's figure under

that jacket and pants she wore while he was being questioned, but she sure filled out her blouse pretty well.

Arlen shook his head. It just wasn't fair. A showgirl type on one side, and a hot-looking lady cop on the other. Shit, some guys really did get all the goddamn luck.

"And in case you're wondering, detective," Coburn said, "those two state troopers who'd been riding alongside your van are in surgery right now. The surgeons are doing the best they can, but..."

Ackerman gritted his teeth and exhaled sharply. "Damn. What're their chances?"

Coburn paused. "To be honest, it doesn't look good. One is suffering from massive head trauma, a broken collarbone, and a punctured lung. The other has a fractured pelvis, two broken legs, and there's the possibility his spine was severed at the base. The doctors may be able to save them, but they'll never be the same men they were."

The detective frowned. "Shit," was his only comment.

"And my... husband, Dr Coburn?" Allie asked hesitantly.

That was odd, Arlen thought. It was almost like she wasn't used to saying the word. Didn't the two of them just get married? He shrugged. Newlyweds; who can figure them out, anyway?

Coburn smiled, and placed a consoling hand on Allie's shoulder. "Your husband got a nasty cut on his forehead, Mrs Gaines, but you'll be able to take him home today. We stitched him up and gave him a tetanus shot, Lord knows how much bird shit and rust was caked on that light, and I'll prescribe something for the pain. The stitches should dissolve in a few days, but make sure he keeps the area clean so it doesn't get infected."

Allie smiled. "Sure. And thank you, doctor."

"You can thank me by not showing up in my ER again looking like you just fought a losing war," Coburn replied. "I'd prefer not having to see that many people stagger in here drenched in blood for a good long while, if it's all the same to you."

"We'll try to keep that in mind, doctor," Ackerman said good-naturedly.

Coburn stared silently at each of them in turn, then looked to the detective. "You're the people from the Tower, aren't you? I saw your pictures on the news."

It was Allie who answered. "Uh, yeah, that's us," she said quietly, then smiled nervously. "We kinda have a knack for getting into trouble, huh?"

"I'd consider that the understatement of the century," the doctor replied. "I'll drop by again when Mr Gaines and Ms Engels are ready to be released." She turned to go, stopped, turned back to Ackerman. "Oh, wait." She fished around in her coat pockets, and came up with a scrap of paper, which she handed to the detective. "Ms Engels couldn't find her cell phone, so she asked if you could call her next door neighbor, Mrs Barker, and ask her how..." She paused, and closed her eyes for a moment. "A-Rod and Jolly?"

"Her cats," Ackerman explained with a smile.

"Are doing," she continued. "Apparently, she's cat-sitting until Ms Engels gets back." She pointed to the paper. "That's Mrs Barker's number. Ms Engels just wants to make sure they're okay."

"Sure thing, doctor," he replied. "You can tell her I'll get right on it."

"I will," Coburn said. She nodded at the group. "Nice to meet you all."

"Thanks, doc," Arlen chimed in. "And it was nice meeting *you*." He turned on his megawatt smile, hopefully guaranteed to charm the nylon stockings right off those pretty legs of hers.

The light bulb apparently needed replacing, and the charm an upgrade, because all Coburn did was stare at him coolly, then turn on her heel and walk off. Arlen wasn't too surprised by her reaction. She sure had a nice walk, though.

"Wow," Ackerman said in mock astonishment. "You're a regular lady-killer, Ploog, you know that?"

"Oh, leave him alone," Allie replied. "Why do you have to keep picking on him, huh? He's gone through as much hell as the rest of us. There's no reason to keep kicking his ass just because he didn't do your job for you."

"What?" Ackerman said angrily. He took a menacing step toward Allie, and she backed up a step, bumping against one of the waiting room chairs. She lost her balance and sat down heavily in the molded plastic seat. "What do you think I was doing all day yesterday? Jacking off in the squad room? No, I was looking for Diaz. And if somebody had seen fit to drop a dime on the son of a bitch," he stared daggers at Arlen before turning back to her, "he'd be sitting in an interview room right about now giving us a statement. But because that didn't happen, he's still loose somewhere on the streets, and I haven't got a fuckin' clue where to find him. For all I know, he's across the border in Barstow, havin' a beer and laughin' his ass off over how he gave Las Vegas PD the slip."

He leaned forward and down, to put his face on the same level as hers. "A potential child killer, Mrs Gaines," he said in a softer tone. "And I lost him because somebody made the choice to sit on vital information, rather than step up and act like a man." He didn't bother to look in Arlen's direction this time. "Now do you see why I might be inclined to act a little disrespectfully to Mr Ploog, Mrs Gaines?"

Allie nodded. "I guess so," she said quietly. "Yeah."

The look she gave Arlen spoke volumes: anger, disgust, sorrow... and pity. Pity for a pathetic loser who valued his own life over that of a child.

But how was he supposed to have known about the kid, huh? How the fuck was he supposed to know? And now that he did, it was tearing him up inside. All right, maybe he should've fought the guy, but that would've only gotten him killed. Maybe he should've called the cops right off the bat, but who's to say they would've caught him anyway?

Or maybe he just never should've gone to that goddamn restaurant last night. Then he wouldn't be in all this fuckin' trouble, and he could've continued to live his uneventful, gambling loss-filled life in peaceful ignorance. Without killer elevators trying to crash with him inside. Without driverless vans trying to smear him across the roadway. And without some fuckin' cop treating him like shit because he'd been looking out for his own safety.

Goddammit, why did they have to look at him like he was some kind of fuckin' monster?

"I... I didn't know," was all he could mutter. "I'm sorry, but I just didn't know. All right?"

But the only answer he received was from his nervous stomach as it bubbled and roiled.

With a heavy heart, Arlen trudged down the hall toward the men's room, trying to ignore the burning sensation he felt between his shoulder blades from the hateful glares that were focused on him.

SIXTEEN

"Well, it's not the Presidential Suite," Tom said, "but I guess it's gonna have to do."

Not that he and Allie had much of a choice about it, he thought as he stepped into the motel room and dropped their suitcases and bags on the floor. Having been bumped out of Merlin's Tower while the building was undergoing its safety inspection, and with the more prominent hotels along the Strip booked solid, about the best accommodations the newlyweds could be offered by the City of Las Vegas was a less than stately one-room "suite" at a motor lodge on Paradise Road. It was a take it or leave it kind of proposition, as it was explained to them by Special Agent Hotz, the only other option given them being a choice of cots in a storeroom in the basement of the Federal Building back on Bridger Avenue.

But it wasn't as though the Budget's Friend Inn was a terrible place in which to spend the next few days; it just wasn't as grand as the one in which they'd spent the past couple of nights. The room, at least at first glance, looked fairly clean; the air conditioner built into the front wall near the base of the door hummed quietly, instead of rattled with a clash of worn-out parts, and the bed didn't look like it would collapse when they both got on it.

There was a color TV bolted onto a swivel base that was set into a corner of the room near the ceiling, like the kind you see in hospitals, and below that a dresser with two sets of drawers; a small lamp and a remote control for the TV stood on top of it. Near the left side of the bed was a small desk, the majority of its surface taken up by another lamp, a clock/radio, and a plastic ice bucket. The bathroom was on the far side of the room; he'd be checking it out soon enough. And on the walk up to this second floor "suite", he'd spotted an ice machine, a snack machine, and a soda dispenser, so it wasn't as though there were no places in the immediate vicinity from which to pick up food... if your eating habits mirrored those of a sugar-addicted six year-old, that is.

"Oh," he heard Allie say from behind him. He turned to find her still standing in the doorway, her head slowly moving side to side as she looked around in mild shock.

"So, what do you think?" he asked sarcastically. "Cozy, huh?"

The left corner of her upper lip curled slightly in disgust. "Yeah," she said slowly. "Real cozy. Don't know how I could've missed this one in the vacation package deals."

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and gently led her into the room. "Well, just keep in mind that places like this aren't supposed to be the kind you hang out in; they're where you dump your shit so you can go hit the casinos. You leave in the morning, you crash here at night." He gave her a reassuring squeeze. "Hey, it's not like we're under house arrest. We can come and go as we please."

"Yeah," she replied. "We're just not allowed to go home."

"So?" he said, trying to sound encouraging. "There's still plenty of stuff to do while the FBI susses out what caused the accident. Besides, it's not like we really needed to drive out to Barstow."

"You're only saying that because now we're even closer to your *Star Trek* thing," she said, putting on a cute-as-all-hell pout. "So at least *you're* happy."

Tom tried to act like her keen observation meant nothing to him, even though the Hilton *was* just a few blocks away. "Yeah? I hadn't noticed." But knowing Allie, she no doubt knew he was full of shit. He shrugged. "Anyway, we should probably keep a low profile until this blows over."

Of course, as they both realized, that might be impossible to do. After he and Allie had been discharged from the hospital, they'd called their families to let them know they were okay. That's when his mother told him the "Strip Maul Disaster" (where the fuck did reporters come up with shit like that?) was international news, and their faces and names were probably printed in every paper in the country. Their pictures had been shown so often on news reports every hour, they were practically TV stars.

And it didn't stop there. When the group had arrived at the Tower to claim their belongings, their replacement van had been swarmed by the press, and even some of the other hotel guests. Everybody had

a question, and everybody was demanding an answer, and Tom had started to think they might have to fight their way into the underground garage.

The need never arose, though, because the cops swooped in to clear a path. And once the van got inside, the group split up: he and Allie headed for their room to pack; Ackerman and his girlfriend went off to see her bosses at that magic show Tom and Allie had been meaning to check out; and as for Ploog... Well, he just wandered away to get his car. Ackerman had given him a stern warning about seeing him later (whatever that meant), and Allie had looked away when Ploog tried to say goodbye to her. Tom had felt sorry for the guy; he looked crushed. Well, he thought, at least I had the decency to shake his hand. After all, we're all in the same boat with this elevator thing, aren't we?

"So, what do you want to do now?" Allie asked.

Tom flashed a devilish smile. "Well, there's a bed currently not being used, in case you hadn't noticed."

She stuck out the tip of her tongue and made a face. "Eww. You know what they say about motel beds, don't you?"

He shook his head. "Uh-uh."

"You sleep on a motel bed, you're sleeping with everybody who's ever fucked on it."

"Oh. Really?" He thought about it for a couple of seconds. Not exactly the sort of comment that opened the door to foreplay, but, "Is that a problem for you?"

"Nope," she said with a shrug, and smiled. "Just thought I'd mention it."

"Thanks," he mumbled sarcastically.

Allie sighed, and closed the door. Then she reached down and snatched one of her bags off the floor. "I need a shower and a change of clothes," she commented, and gestured to the surgical scrubs they were both still wearing. "You do, too."

Back at the Tower, all she'd wanted to do was pack and get the hell out of the building as fast as possible. And with the service elevator the only one still in use, the remaining two outside cars having been shut down until further notice, there was a bottleneck on every floor,

with lines of people waiting to take it down to the lobby. So, as Allie had put it, if that meant she and Tom had to stay dressed up like a couple of medical students for a little while longer, that was fine with her, so long as they were ultimately able to put some distance between them and the Tower.

Well, the Tower was about two miles behind them, so cleaning up and putting on some fresh clothes sounded like a good idea. It sounded even better, Tom figured, if maybe they did it together—a regular couple's kind of activity.

As she headed toward the bathroom, he just smiled and admired the view. Even in baggy green pants, there was no hiding that cute little wiggle her ass made when she walked.

"You gonna need some help in there?" he asked playfully. "You know how much trouble you have with those hard-to-reach places."

She stopped at the door, and stood there for a moment with her back to him. When she turned around, he was stunned to see her eyes tearing up. For some reason, she looked scared.

"Oh, Tom, I don't know," she said hesitantly. "I mean, with everything that's happened, and the tests we took at the hospital."

So, that was it: the AIDS test. Yeah, that had scared the shit out of him, too, when that Dr Coburn had brought it up. But it had made sense to take it, especially with all the blood that had been flying around the van, and Tom with a big gash on his forehead. Until the five of them got the results in a few days, it was gonna be Tension City all around.

He crossed the room, and wrapped his arms around his wife. "Hey, don't worry about it," he assured her. "The machine needed a little downtime anyway, right? That's what you said last night."

Her laugh was muffled by his shirt. "I'm still not putting on the tin foil," she said.

Tom sighed. "You are a harsh mistress."

She nudged him in the stomach with her fist. "I'll remember you said that next time I go shopping for a whip."

His eyebrows rose. "I didn't even know there was a *first* time," he commented.

She looked up and smiled. "Well, a girl's gotta have her secrets. I'm sure you have a few I don't know about." She winked. "This marriage thing's gonna be quite the learning experience, huh?"

"For you and me both," he agreed, and kissed the tip of her nose. Then he smiled slyly. "So... what do you wanna do about the bed?"

Her smile widened. "Why don't you go try it out?"

That took him by surprise. "What, alone?"

Her right hand slid along his crotch, and Little Tom came wide-awake. "That's why God gave you two hands and an imagination, right?" she said in a husky voice.

"You could always help out, y'know," he suggested. "I wouldn't object."

She gave him a little slap on the balls; he winced. "You'll be fine," she whispered. And before he could object, she'd stepped into the bathroom and closed the door.

"Yeah," he muttered. "But it won't be the same thing."

On the other side of the door, Allie stood smiling for a couple of seconds. It might be a little too early to tell, but it looked like things might be starting to get back to normal: Tom wanted sex, but she controlled the situation. It looked like married life was starting to agree with her.

She shrugged out of the hospital clothes and tossed them in a corner of the bathroom. As baggy and unattractive and eye-woundingly *green* as the scrubs were, they'd proved useful in at least one regard—they'd kept everyone from knowing she went commando when it came to undergarments. God only knew how Tom might have reacted if he'd found out; he might have popped a major boner on the ride to the Tower. Well, maybe that would be another of those secrets she'd mentioned to him that she'd be willing to share. Some other time.

She stepped over to the shower. Given the small size of the room, there wasn't space enough for a bathtub, so the shower was of the glass cabinet variety, its walls rising full-length from floor to ceiling.

She opened its door and turned on the faucets, tweaking the hot and cold until the temperature of the water was just how she liked it. As steam began building, she closed the door and moved back to the bag she'd brought in, from which she selected jeans, a black T-shirt and a pair of black ankle-socks. The clothes were placed on the toilet tank, then she returned to the bag to retrieve her make-up kit, brushes, and travel blowdryer, which went on the sink counter.

"You want some take out?" Tom called from outside. "There's a list of restaurants here that says there's a Chinese place around the corner."

"Sure," she yelled back. "Get me the General Tso Chicken if they have it. And some spring rolls."

"Okay. Be back in a few."

She heard the door open and close. Yeah, she, thought, some spicy Chinese take out sounded good right about now. She hadn't had much to eat since she'd puked out her guts in the van, and just the mere mention of food had set her stomach rumbling.

Another dip into the bag, and she came up with bottles of apple-scented body wash and Herbal Essences shampoo. With one in each hand, she slid open the glass door and stepped under the water.

She hadn't been in the shower more than two minutes when it tried to kill her.

The vat of oil bubbled and hissed as the woman reached in with a pair of long-handled tongs to pull out a chicken wing. The skin was dark-brown and crispy; a little too crispy for Tom's liking. Deep-fried wings from a Chinese take out wasn't his favorite kind of chicken, but the restaurant guide back at the motel hadn't indicated any KFC franchises in the immediate vicinity. He mentally shrugged. Sometimes you just had to make do with what's available, right?

The woman behind the counter, who looked like she could be anywhere from forty to sixty, it was hard to judge, dropped the wing and two others in a wax paper bag and stapled the top. "Ah, General

Tso Chicken ready in a minute," she said in an accent as heavy and crisp as the wings she served.

Tom nodded pleasantly, and turned around to watch the goings-on outside on Desert Inn Road. It was a little difficult to get a clear view; a cloud of pork-scented smoke swirled around the restaurant in the thick air, pushed along by two aging ceiling fans, and the windows were caked with a thick layer of grease. When this place might have last been visited by a health inspector was a question Tom didn't even want to consider; in all likelihood, it'd been when the first President Bush was in office.

But that was all right with Tom. As he'd often discovered, it was the most questionable-looking eateries that served the best food, and the largest portions. Probably had more to do with focusing on the dishes they made and keeping the customers happy, rather than with worrying about scraping the built-up layers of grease and food bits that surrounded the oversized burners on the stoves. And if that held true for this take out joint, which Tom felt strongly it did, then Allie better be ready for some really spicy General Tso's Chicken.

Spices guaranteed to burn the roof of her mouth.

Protecting the roof of her mouth from burns was the last thing Allie was thinking about. She was more concerned with keeping her skin from boiling right off the bone under the torrent of scalding hot water that was pouring out of the shower head.

For the tenth time, she tried to open the glass door, and for the tenth time it refused to slide back along its track. It was as though the door was stuck, or maybe something on the other side was holding it closed.

She banged on the glass. "Tom!" she screamed. "Tom, get in here! Tom, please! I can't shut off the water!"

No answer. He was probably still out, buying the Chinese food.

She grabbed the hot water faucet, noticing just how red the skin of her hands was in the boiling cloud of steam, and tried turning it all the way to the left, surely to shut it off. Like the door, however, it

resisted her efforts. Then she tried the cold water faucet. That turned easily, and to her surprise, the jet of burning water began to cool. She smiled and looked up at the shower head as the water slowed to a trickle.

Allie let out a short laugh. "You'll have to do better than that to kill me, fucker."

And then, in a burst of pressure like that of a fire hose nozzle being opened, the shower head rocketed off the pipe and slammed into Allie's right temple.

Dazed, she stumbled back as water poured out of the open pipe. Her left heel came down on the bottle of body wash, the plastic container slipped out from under her foot, and she lost her balance. With a loud thump, the back of her head bounced off the tiled wall behind her. Blue eyes rolled back in their sockets as she lost consciousness and slid bonelessly to the floor.

The water continued to flow out from the broken pipe, first pooling around Allie's prone body—then rising.

"General Tso Chicken with po fried rice, chicken wings, steam dumpling," the Chinese woman said, placing a plastic shopping bag on the counter. "Your order ready."

"Terrific," Tom said, and pulled out his wallet to pay.

"Thirteen forty-five," she said, and he handed her a twenty-dollar bill. As she rang up the order on the cash register, a supermarket-style relic covered with plastic sheeting to protect it from the grease that seemed to get on everything in the restaurant, she glanced back at him. "You doctor?"

"Huh?" Tom said, then he looked down at his garb. He was still wearing the green surgical scrubs. He smiled. "No. I just borrowed these."

She nodded, although it wasn't entirely clear she'd understood his comment. "You look like doctor. On the TV."

"Oh," he said pleasantly. "Well, thanks."

She nodded again and handed him his change. Tom grabbed the bag of food and headed out the door with a final wave to the woman. As he walked down the street, he held the bag up under his nose and took a deep breath. His nostrils filled with the aroma of chicken and pork and deep-fried grease guaranteed to clog his arteries. Not the kind of thing a real physician would recommend to his patients, but then Tom Gaines wasn't a real doctor; he just played one. Like the actors on TV.

Me a doctor, he thought with a grin, remembering the Chinese woman's comment about how he looked like one. Won't that shock the hell outta Allie when I tell her?

It was the shock of finding herself underwater that brought Allie to full awareness. She screamed, unleashing a torrent of air bubbles, and then the water tried to force its way into her lungs.

She closed her mouth and put hand to her throat. *Like that's gonna do any good*, the tiny voice called out from the back of her mind. She then looked around. The stall had filled almost to the top, and more was still flowing in. A dark shape floating near her head caught her attention, and she turned to find the Herbal Essence bottle bobbing up and down in the makeshift water tank.

Grabbing the door handle, Allie pulled with all her might, but it wouldn't open. She banged on the glass, but the impact sounded so muffled, she couldn't be sure Tom would hear it, even if he were standing right by the bathroom door.

It was difficult to hold her breath any longer; every muscle in her throat was urging her to open her mouth and inhale. Kicking her legs, she pushed off the floor and shot up to the top of the stall.

Her nose and mouth broke the surface; there was about four or five inches of open space between the rising water and the ceiling. She managed to suck in a big, hungry breath before her hand slipped on one of the walls and she went under.

She popped back up immediately, but there was less air available as the water continued its upward crawl. Allie tried to raise her head

higher, and banged her nose on the white wallpapered ceiling. The bump submerged her again.

One last try. Her lips scraped along the dusty, mold-spotted ceiling as she drew in the last remaining oxygen in the death chamber.

Drowning in some fleabag motel shower, she thought. This is such a fucking stupid way to die!

And then she went down for the third time.

Tom knew something was wrong the second he saw the water seeping out from under the bathroom door.

"Hey, Allie, you better turn off the water in there. You're gettin' the rug out here all wet," he called out as he set the bags of Chinese food on the dresser. When he received no answer, he said, "Allie? You okay in there?"

Still no answer, and now he quickly moved to the door. It was locked. He knocked loudly on the painted wood. "Allie? What's going on?"

Nothing. Now he was really getting worried, and he started pushing the door. When that produced no results, he turned to slamming his shoulder against it. Finally, he took a step back, gritted his teeth, and lashed out with his right foot. The wood around the knob plate split, and he kicked it again. This time, the wood broke, and the door swung open.

Tom stepped into the bathroom, his eyes following the trail of water across the floor and back to its source.

"Jesus Christ!" he screamed.

The loud thumping sound reached Allie's ears just as she was about to inhale. The air had run out. She couldn't fight to stay conscious any longer; all she wanted to do was open her mouth and take a deep breath to ease the ache in her lungs.

Dazed, she slowly opened her eyes. Some dark shape outside the shower stall was fighting with the door, trying to pull it open.

What? she thought hazily. The... fucker's drowning me, now he wants to... get inside and watch up close?

The figure banged on the glass a few times, but that had as little effect on it as Allie's own attempts. Then he, or it, disappeared. Probably just... makin' sure I couldn't... get out, she thought.

Then something heavy crashed against the door, and the glass shattered.

Instantly, the water began pouring out of the stall with the force of a raging river. As the level quickly dropped, Allie clawed her way to the top and greedily sucked in all the air her tortured lungs could hold. Then, placing her feet on the floor and her hands on the rear wall of the shower, she braced herself before the tide could sweep her into the jagged shards of glass now lining the edges of the door.

When the flood had abated, she looked up to find Tom standing outside, a dented, scratched suitcase in one hand. A large sliver of glass was sticking out from between one of the metal clasps.

"Jesus, Allie, are you okay?" Tom asked, his voice filled with concern.

She nodded weakly, and coughed out a mouthful of water. "Is that your bag... or one of mine?" she croaked.

He looked confused, then glanced at the suitcase. "Mine."

She managed to force a smile. "Good."

Tom stepped over the broken glass and picked her up. "Thank you," she whispered, wrapping her arms around his neck. She kissed him on the tip of his nose, then let her head rest on his shoulder as he carried her out of the stall.

Once clear of the glass, Tom gently stood her up on the bathroom floor. He still kept one arm around her waist, in case she should fall. God knows I feel like keeling over, she thought.

"Hey," she suddenly remarked, and paused to spit out some more water. "Did you get my chicken?"

The look on her husband's face was priceless.

Tom was about to answer his wife's question, amazed she could still be concerned about Chinese food after she'd just almost drowned, when the sound of a miniature turbine engine starting up interrupted him. He looked over to the bathroom sink, and realized Allie's travel blow dryer had switched on—all by itself.

"Tom," Allie whispered, that single word filled with so much fear.

As they watched, the blow dryer began rattling against the Formica surface of the counter and then slowly inched its way toward the edge.

That was the moment when Tom realized that he and Allie were standing in three inches of water.

"Oh, fuck me," he mumbled. He looked at Allie, whose eyes were as big as ashtrays. "Run!" he bellowed, and shoved her out of the bathroom.

They ran across the suite, splashing their way through the sodden carpeting in a race for the front door.

Which slammed shut just as Tom reached it.

"Shit!" he screamed, and immediately began wrestling with the knob.

Then the television switched on, followed by the clock/radio. There was no sound coming from the TV's speakers; silently, its screen flickered wildly, offering a dizzying montage of newscast images of the Tower disaster as it scrolled up and down the channels. The radio, on the other hand, apparently had its volume knob set at eleven, and the room filled with the sound of a throbbing bass line. It seemed familiar, but he couldn't place it.

Allie, though, apparently had no trouble recognizing the song. "We gotta get outta this place," she half whispered in singsong fashion.

That was the tune they'd heard on the elevator before it crashed, wasn't it? Well, shit. He'd be freaked out, too, if he thought about that weird coincidence. It was almost like the song was following them around.

Maybe she thought so, too. "Open the goddamn door!" she screamed hysterically.

"I'm trying!" he snapped.

Trying didn't seem good enough, however. She snatched up the remaining suitcase in both hands and whipped around in a circle like a Russian shot-putter, then let go. The suitcase smashed out the plate glass window and flew over the second-floor railing.

The lights in the room suddenly dimmed.

"Fuck!" Tom yelled.

There was an explosion from the bathroom; the blow dryer no doubt making contact with the water and Tom scooped up Allie in his arms. He took a running leap and dived through the broken window just as the electrical charge tore through the suite. The television exploded. The radio did the same, cutting off Eric Burdon in mid-screech, followed by the lamps and the air-conditioner. The smoke detector mounted on the ceiling screamed unmercifully.

Out on the landing, Tom groaned and rubbed the base of his spine, which he'd slammed into the railing after his mad jump to safety. Dimly, he wondered if there was a Rite-Aid or Walgreen's nearby; he was gonna need a mountain of Tylenol to knock back the agonizing pain he was feeling. He would have checked the motel guide, but the book had probably burned up in the explosion.

He staggered back to the window and peered in to check out the damage, but the room was filled with smoke. He'd have to wait for the air to clear.

"Uh, Tom," Allie said slowly. "A little help?"

He turned to face her. She was standing awkwardly, legs drawn tightly together, left hand covering her crotch while her right arm was crossed over her breasts to hide her nipples.

"Hey, you're naked," he said dumbly.

"You're tellin' *me*!" crowed a voice from below. Tom looked over the railing. A small crowd had gathered down in the parking area, and they pointed toward the couple, and yammered amongst themselves. All except for one old man in the front of the pack. He was wrinkled and sunburned, with a scraggly white beard that hadn't seen a razor's touch in decades. He was dressed in a pair of baggy shorts and a white T-shirt emblazoned with the Hooters logo; unfortunately, he had the right-sized man-boobs to fill out the waitress requirements. There wasn't anything touristy about him, so

odds were good he didn't just stay at the Budget's Friend Inn, he probably lived there.

"You folks do a late-night show, too?" he asked with a grin that looked like a broken picket fence. "I'd buy a ticket to *that* for a dollar!"

The crowd roared with laughter.

"Great," Tom heard Allie mutter behind him. "Maybe whatever's trying to kill us wants us to die of embarrassment instead."

"I'll handle this," he assured her without turning around. "Nothing to worry about, folks," he told the onlookers, and pointed to the surgical scrubs he was still wearing. "I'm a doctor." He whipped off his shirt and slid it over Allie. "I was just... uh... checking on one of my patients."

A middle-aged woman wearing too much makeup for her own good, or anybody's good, for that matter, gazed up at him for a second, then clucked her tongue. "Sweetheart, that excuse didn't work for my third husband." She frowned. "Now, really. Don't the two of you think you're a little old to be playing 'doctor'?"

Tom smiled nervously, and started guiding his wife back to their room. "We'll just... go back inside. Sorry to have bothered you folks."

"I ain't bothered," the old-timer said with a big grin. "Your girlie there's got a great set o' cans."

Tom didn't know how to respond to that. He glanced at Allie.

She smiled at the old man. "Thank you."

He let loose a phlegmy laugh. "No, thank *you*, honey. Next time you're in the mood t'step out on the landin' again like that, you just lemme know. Beats watchin' reruns of *The Jeffersons* all hollow." He gave her a sly wink.

Tom looked at Allie. She almost laughed when she caught sight of the confused expression he knew he was showing. "Hey, as your husband, am I supposed to be jealous about that?"

"What?" she replied. "Some old man gettin' his thrills by ogling your wife's great set of cans?" She shrugged. "I don't know. Was he lying?"

He instinctively looked for himself at the evidence. "That they're great? No."

"Then forget about it," she said. She turned to go back inside, then came to an abrupt halt in the doorway. "Uh... maybe we should ask the manager if there's another room available."

Tom looked past her, into the suite. The place was a total disaster. The carpeting was soaked through, yet parts of it were smoldering from the electrical fire. The TV hung limply from its shelf, the cable channel wiring about the only thing still keeping it from crashing to the floor. Every lamp and bulb had blown out, and he could see the broken glass that littered the bathroom floor. The air in the room was thick with the smell of ozone and carpet fibers—and greasy Chinese food. In a weird way, it all reminded him of the take out place around the block.

"Shit," he muttered. "Hope the city doesn't mind paying for this, too."

"Forget about the room," Allie said in a grave tone of voice. "We need to talk to the others. Right away."

"How come?" he asked.

Allie wrapped her arms around her body, like she'd just gotten a sudden chill. "Because whatever just tried to kill us is probably gonna go after them as well," she replied. "And it's not gonna stop until we're all dead."

SEVENTEEN

When she entered the dressing room backstage at *Magipalooza!*, Shawna's first impression was that nothing would ever be the same. The shellshocked expressions of the other dancers and showgirls, the squabbling among the dressers, the brusque attitude of management. It was like there was a dark cloud hanging over everyone. And she had a feeling it would be a long time before any of them saw sunlight again, especially if the rumors she'd heard being whispered were true.

"You're closing the show?" she asked Milos Hewetson as the producer came stomping around backstage. It had been an innocent question, but it obviously brought him up short, and transformed his normally relaxed smile into a fierce snarl.

"Closing the show?" he echoed. "Where the hell did you hear that?"

"Just... you know," she said hesitantly. "Around." Suddenly, she wished she hadn't encouraged Warren to get back to work. But with a partner in the hospital and a suspected child-killer running loose on the streets, he really had better things to occupy his time than play nursemaid to his girlfriend. Not that she thought she needed any help in handling her boss. She'd dealt with more than her fair share of "A" type personalities when she was stripping Downtown. It was just that she didn't want to get anyone in trouble. Or herself. And considering just how politically motivated things could be backstage, making trouble for someone would mean she was only making trouble for herself—and the repercussions could be devastating. Losing her job would only be the tip of the iceberg. It wasn't as though dance captains didn't talk among themselves, trading gossip and stories about their companies.

"Well, you heard wrong," Milos said, sounding just a tad less short-tempered. "The show isn't closing, we just have to vacate the hotel for a short time. It's a safety issue. What with the accident, and the damage to the building, the Tower's board of directors thinks it's for the best if we take a break. Besides, they're already trying to find rooms for the guests at other hotels. Nobody's being allowed to stay

here right now." He shook his head mournfully. "I sure hope they don't wind up closing the Tower for good. I'd have to find somewhere else to move the whole goddamn show."

"How long a break are we talking about?" Shawna asked. Stopping a show, even for a brief hiatus, could mean certain death for a Las Vegas production. Audiences would find other shows to attend, and it would be difficult, sometimes even impossible, to lure them back. And a drop in ticket sales meant the producers would need to make budgetary cuts—including staff reductions. And if that should happen in the case of *Magipalooza!*, there was a frightening possibility that a certain stripper named Mystique could very well end up making her triumphant return to the streets of downtown LA.

Milos shrugged. "A couple of weeks; maybe longer. Just until the building inspectors have made sure the whole goddamn place isn't gonna come crashing down around our ears. He winced, apparently realizing to whom exactly he was speaking. "Hey, sorry about that, kid. It was a bad joke. A really bad joke."

"That's all right, Mr Hewetson," she said. She smiled, to let him know she hadn't been offended. "If we didn't laugh about it, we'd probably start crying, right?"

"You got that so right," he agreed, nodding his head. "And really, you don't want to see me when I get all weepy. It's not a pretty sight." He paused. "So, uh... how are you doing?" he asked gently, like he was afraid of what the answer might be.

She hesitated and looked away, feeling the smile start to weaken. "I'm... okay," she replied, although she knew the subdued tone of her voice made it pretty clear she was anything *but* okay. "It's just gonna take a while to put it behind me." She looked up at him. "Behind all of us, I guess. But I'm alive, and Warren's alive, and I'm thankful for that."

"He's the cop, right?" Milos asked. "So." He leaned in close, glancing around to see if anyone was standing within earshot of their conversation. A tired-looking stagehand walked by, but it didn't even look like he knew they were there. "Does he, you know, have any leads on what happened?" he asked in a conspiratorial murmur. "There've been some really strange reports on the news."

Shawna shook her head. "It's not his case. He can't investigate it; he's one of the eyewitnesses. The FBI is handling it."

Milos smiled slyly, like they were sharing a secret. "All right, that's the official story, but off the record, he's really poking around, trying to find the cause, right? I mean, he was right in the center of the action. Doesn't he want to know what caused it?"

"Well, of course he wants to know what caused it," Shawna replied, "but I'm telling you the truth. He can't go 'poking around' just because he's a detective. It's a lot more complicated than just an investigation." She leaned in and whispered, "The FBI and the police don't really see eye-to-eye on these things, you know. They hate it when someone steps on their toes and tries stealing their case. On something like this, there's a lot of one-upmanship going on."

To be honest, she didn't know if any of that was really true, but that's how law enforcement relationships were always portrayed on TV and in the movies: cops hunt for killers, the FBI gets in the way and screws things up. And based on what she'd experienced firsthand during her time at police headquarters this morning, she hadn't really seen anything that might have dispelled that notion.

Especially when it came to that Special Agent Hotz. She knew the guy was an asshole the moment she met him, and hadn't cared for his strong-arm tactics in trying to get her to confess to being part of some crazy terrorist plot he'd cooked up. He'd actually tried using her stripping career as a lever on her. Shit, like that was going to tear apart her family. Her parents, she'd pointed out, were incredibly well informed when it came to what their daughter had been up to in the years since she left the nest. Her mom had even driven all the way from Carson City one time to see her entertain the regulars at Shakes. Her parents hadn't been pleased with their only child's career choice, but they hadn't disowned her, either. Besides, everything had worked out in the end, when Shawna got hired for *Magipalooza!*—there, as her mom had put it, the sight of her hopping around a stage, flashing her boobies at the audience, was neither shocking nor tasteless. It was art. Of a sort.

At least that's how they rationalized it to the members of their bridge club.

"So, the Feds are very competitive, huh?" Milos asked. He nodded. "Yeah, I had the feeling it was something like that. Especially when that FBI agent..." He scratched his cheek and stared into space. "What was his name again?"

"Special Agent Hotz?" Shawna offered.

"Yeah, that's the one. He came over here and started asking everyone questions about you. Kept wanting to know if we'd ever seen you acting suspiciously." Milos grinned. "I told him that only happened the time you snuck those boxes of candy into the dressing room." He shook his head. "Like I needed a troupe of dancers running around on a sugar buzz to add to my worries."

That had been the one bit of chaos she'd brought to the company last spring: smuggling in a few boxes of Peeps, the marshmallow candies that were only available in the shapes of chickadees and bunnies around Easter. Some of the girls had never even heard of them, so Shawna had gone out of her way to educate them by picking some up before she arrived at the Tower. It turned into a feeding frenzy once the first box had been opened, and company manager Chip Moench hadn't been pleased when he found his dancers wolfing down little yellow chicks and blue-colored bunnies a couple of hours before showtime. Threatening to deduct the pay of the first person to miss their cues because they were coming down from a sugar high made them focus even harder on the routines. And Shawna had had to formally apologize to everyone for causing such a disruption. It had been worth it, though; now, other people were happy to supply *her* with Peeps, year round.

Milos studied her with a concerned expression. "You're not in any trouble with this guy Hotz, are you?"

"I hope not," she admitted, "but I can't really talk about it. You know how it is."

"Oh, sure, sure," he agreed. "I won't push."

A warbling sound from somewhere in his sport coat interrupted their conversation. Milos reached into the right pocket and pulled out a bright red cell phone. "Yel-lo," he said lightly as he answered it. He listened for a few seconds, then said, "okay, calm down, Uriel. We'll figure out where the cats can stay until this whole mess is

straightened out." Another pause. "Yes, I'm going to take care of it right away, all right? Look, you and your brother meet me in my office in ten minutes; we'll start making the arrangements." He frowned. "No, my backstage office, not my office office. We don't need to drive all the way there to resolve this." He nodded. "Right. See you then." With a weary sigh, Milos closed the phone and put it back in his pocket.

"Gotta run?" Shawna asked.

"Yeah." He shrugged. "Artists. So fucking sensitive, you know? But what am I supposed to do about it? Olivier and him are the stars of the show, right? They want their cats taken care of, so they *get* their cats taken care of."

Shawna had one idea in mind for how the panthers and tigers could be taken of—permanently.

Milos placed his hands on her shoulders. "Look, grab whatever personal effects you have around here, empty out your closet, and go on home. Chip will be in touch with everyone in a few days, and we'll all sit down and discuss whatever the next step is going to be."

"Okay, Mr Hewetson, Shawna said, then smiled. "I *could* use a few days off after all the craziness lately, come to think of it."

"And you deserve it, too," Milos replied. He pulled her forward to give her a peck on the forehead. Then he stepped back. "Say 'hi' to your detective boyfriend for me next time you see him. And... tell him 'good luck with the investigation.'"

With a wink and a hearty laugh, Milos walked off to meet with his two stars.

An hour later, after having said her (hopefully temporary) farewells to her equally depressed coworkers, Shawna made her way through the winding, slot machine-lined aisles of the casino. Over one shoulder, she carried an oversized, white-and-pink knapsack that resembled a feline-esque *Hello Kitty* doll with an over-active thyroid condition. Prior to its current use, it had spent six months folded up in the bottom drawer of a dressing table, right next to the

pair of sparkly, Elton John sunglasses Shawna now wore. Within the bag's puffy nylon depths she'd managed to cram in a variety of cosmetics and toiletries, a padded CD carrying case containing a dozen discs she'd forgotten she owned (her iPod now holding most of her music collection), a few paperback novels, and a number of photographs of her with Warren, and her with her "babies", A-Rod and Jolly. She'd discarded the borrowed hospital scrubs for a pair of jeans and a pink *Hello Kitty* T-shirt she'd found on a hanger in the small closet she shared with two of the dancers. That had been a pleasant surprise; she didn't remember leaving them there, but she was certainly grateful to have them.

Going through the casino from *Magipalooza!*'s theatre was really taking the long way to get to the parking garage, but Shawna had wanted to see what was going on in the rest of the building in the wake of the disaster. It was a little morbid, she thought, to be that interested about something so horrible, especially considering her personal involvement in what had taken place, but such were the mysteries of human nature.

Maybe I should've been a psychiatrist instead of a dancer, she thought wryly. At least it would've paid better.

The casino was fairly deserted, with a few guests, mostly elderly women, wandering around, apparently not able to figure out what they should do now that they'd been denied their daily one-armed exercise sessions. Eventually, they all drifted away, leaving Shawna alone with her thoughts and a roomful of abandoned entertainments.

The most disturbing thing about it all was how eerily silent the place was: as quiet as a church. Or a graveyard. There were no bells ringing, no buzzers buzzing, no shouts of joy, no screams of agony. The lights on the slot machines had been turned off, the roulette wheels were stilled, the dice and cards put away. About the only thing still running was a display near the center of the casino: a giant turntable on which a brand-new Jaguar Limited Edition was mounted on an angle so passersby could see right inside the convertible and marvel at all the extras. It was meant to be the grand prize for some big poker tournament or World Series or something that had been scheduled for next week; a tournament that would

more than likely have to be played somewhere else on the Strip. If it was still going to be played at all, that is.

Whether it was or it wasn't didn't mean much to Shawna. She wasn't big on card games, and even if she were, the games would have been going on while she was working, so she wouldn't have seen anything happen, anyway. But as she stood and watched the turntable slowly rotate the fully loaded automobile in front of her, she had to admit she sure wouldn't mind owning that Jaguar... even if she did have an aversion to big cats.

She heaved a deep sigh in honor of all the expensive things she could never afford, like pricey automobiles, and hitched the strap of the *Hello Kitty* bag a little higher up on her shoulder. Time to head home, she told herself. The boys are probably driving Mrs Barker crazy by now, and I sure do miss my babies.

She turned to go, but then a gleam of the ceiling lights on a piece of metal near her feet caught her eye, and she looked down. There was a large, gold coin lying on the floor: one of the Tower's special markers that poured out of the mega-jackpot slot machines when there was a winning spin. This one was a thousand dollar coin.

Shawna chewed on the nail of her right index finger for a couple of seconds, wondering what she should do. Leave it, or pick it up? Technically, as an employee of the show, she wasn't supposed to gamble where she worked; at least that was the policy set by Milos Hewetson. He thought the sight of his dancers and showgirls plunking quarter after quarter into the slots like a bunch of zombified senior citizens, or being cleaned out at the card tables, would cheapen the "mystique" of his performers. But the management of the Tower had no such restrictions on the troupe. In fact, they encouraged it, thinking that it would help entice more people visiting from the other hotels to stay and spend their money after the performances. And if it was okay with the owners, she thought, why would anyone object if she tried cashing in the chip? Hell, if the show was going to be on hiatus for a number of weeks, she had to have money coming in *somehow*, and a thousand bucks would at least keep her in yogurt and cat food until the crisis passed.

What the hell, she thought, and bent down to retrieve it.

And that was when the Jaguar suddenly slipped free of its moorings, slid off the turntable and began rolling right at her.

Caught in mid-crouch, her fingers mere inches from the coin, Shawna had just enough time to hear it coming, to turn her head as the car lurched and realize what was about to happen.

"Oh, crickets," she whispered, an instant before the bumper of the car slammed into her left side. She screamed as her ribs shattered from the impact, and then the car was pushing her down one of the slot-lined aisles, picking up speed as it went along.

Desperately, Shawna clawed at the car, trying to pull herself onto the hood. The effort almost caused her to black out as her broken bones ground against one another, but she managed to get her hands to stop sliding on the smooth grey metal long enough to start her climb.

And then the left front tire rolled over her right foot, and she shrieked as her ankle snapped. Her hands lost their grip, and her body started slipping under the car, until her chin was level with the edge of the hood.

The Jaguar continued rolling down the aisle, continued to accelerate, and in a red-tinted haze Shawna could see people running after it. She was just about to start screaming for them to help her when a sharp pain exploded across the back of her head.

Her last thoughts were of Warren and her babies. Then everything went dark.

Milos Hewetson heard the screaming from the casino, and jumped up from behind his desk. "Stay here!" he ordered the Mayo Brothers, who were using his phone to make the arrangements for the transfer of their cats to a holding facility. Then he bolted from his office.

Christ Almighty, he thought, first the elevator, then the show closing—now what?

When he got to the scene, he found a large crowd had gathered, clogging the aisles as they all tried to get a look at whatever had captured their attention. Some people looked sick; some were crying.

One old man in tan slacks and a short-sleeved shirt muttered, "That poor, poor girl," as he walked past Milos.

Whenever he looked back at that day, Milos could never explain why he'd suddenly gotten it into his head that the old man must have been talking about Shawna Engels when he made that comment. But something, a feeling, maybe even intuition (if he believed in that female crap) told him that she would be the "poor girl" he'd find in the center of all this. It caused him to panic, made him frantically shove his way through the crowd, knocking aside anyone who was too slow in getting out of his path. And when he at last reached the spot around which everyone was standing, it was to discover that his worst fear had been confirmed.

It was Shawna and she was dead. A car had crushed her against one of the mammoth mega-jackpot slot machines, and her lifeless eyes were wide with disbelief. But it wasn't the shocked expression frozen on her once-pretty face that would haunt Milos Hewetson for the rest of his days; it was what was pouring out of her mouth.

The car had smashed her skull into the payout tray, had opened up the back of her head in a pollack-like spatter of blood and brain tissue, and thousand dollar gold markers were flowing over her tongue in a steady stream. They clinked dully against the Jaguar's grill before dropping to the floor.

"Wow," said a shell-shocked college-age guy standing next to Milos. "Jackpot, huh?"

Shawna Engels had hated cats. Not the house variety, after all, a tortoiseshell named Jolly and a stray black tom named A-Rod shared her apartment in Henderson, eight miles outside Vegas, but the big cats. Tigers. Lions. Panthers. Jaguars. The massive SOBs you'd see on the Animal Planet Channel, tearing into a caribou or a zebra or whatever the hell it was they ate on those nature shows.

And in the end, just like she'd always feared, it was a big cat that took her life. Because a jaguar was a jaguar, even if it was a car, and in the right frame of mind, a five foot seven, one hundred and twenty

pound brunette was just another potential meal on the hoof in its eyes.

Or its headlights.

EIGHTEEN

Arlen had a fairly good idea why Detective Ackerman was willing to let him go off on his own once they returned to Merlin's Tower, even though the cop had promised to keep an eye on him. He was probably sick of looking at the lowlife who'd put a crimp in his murder investigation. That, or he just wanted to spend some quality time with that sweet-looking girlfriend of his; Arlen was sure he'd seen her walking around the Tower more than once.

Of course, knowing the kind of hard as nails cop Ackerman was, the disgust angle was probably the better bet.

It didn't seem to matter that this Diaz guy could have killed Arlen, or that maybe Ackerman should have been more understanding, now that they'd both cheated Death twice, first with the elevator, then with the van. You know—that male bonding shit that people on TV like Dr Phil are always talking about. But no. All that mattered to Ackerman was that he considered Arlen some sort of gutless wonder who hadn't wanted to get involved or act like a responsible citizen; who'd only looked out for himself, and prevented Las Vegas PD from getting their man. Well, the world was filled with people who didn't give a shit about anybody but themselves, who didn't want to get involved—why should Arlen Ploog be singled out for the poster boy role?

Because it was a kid who'd been killed, that was why. Because if Arlen hadn't talked himself out of calling the cops, maybe the kid's killer would be locked up by now.

So, yeah, Arlen could understand where Ackerman was coming from; he just didn't think the cop should treat him like he was as bad as Diaz. Still, he'd put in a call to Mr Kim when he got home, make sure the cops got the videotape from yesterday, if there really *had* been a tape in the recorder. He couldn't imagine what use they'd get out of it; it wouldn't show anything of real interest, other than the fact Arlen folded up pretty well when he was taking a beating, but it was theirs if they wanted it. And maybe once it was in their hands, Ackerman would stop looking at him like he was a piece of shit.

Or maybe not.

The group's parting at the Tower played out awkwardly, to say the least. Only Tom Gaines stepped up to shake Arlen's hand; the girls just turned their heads and looked away. But Ackerman promised to "see you later", and probably meant it to sound like the threat Arlen took it to be. Well, Arlen figured, his phone number and address were in the police report; the cop could damn well track him down if he wanted to talk.

Arlen walked down the garage ramp to the third level, where he'd parked his aging Monte Carlo last night. As he made his way along the winding concrete path, he searched for his car keys. Since his and everyone else's clothes had been trashed at the hospital, they'd each been given a plastic bag containing their personal effects. When he'd been standing in the emergency room, dressed like the others in surgical scrubs and holding a white shopping bag, Arlen had gotten the humorous impression that they looked like a bunch of Halloween trick-or-treaters wearing doctor costumes. He hadn't bothered to share the observation with any of them; Ackerman, no doubt, would have told him to shut the fuck up.

He found the keys at the bottom of the bag, under his wallet, some loose change, a couple of pens, and a receipt from his dinner at The Lady of the Lake. Hey, he suddenly thought, maybe I oughtta try puttin' that thing up on eBay. It's a cola lector's item now, right? Must be some ghoul out there willing to pay out for a memento from the "Strip Maul Disaster". Catchy title, by the way.

He found the Monte Carlo right where he'd left it, but it wasn't in quite the same condition it had been in when he headed off to dinner: somebody had stuck a big, white sheet of paper on the windshield. It was a notice from garage management, informing him that his car was illegally parked (he'd only paid for the space till noon), and that it would be towed away at his expense if he didn't move it posthaste.

That's just so fuckin' typical, Arlen thought. All hell breaks loose around here, but some yutz is still dedicated enough to his job to give the guests shit about how they're parked. Bunch o' motherfuckers.

He reached for the notice, intending to toss it on the ground, only to discover it had a sticky backing—and was glued solid to the windshield. "Goddammit," he moaned. "I hate when they do shit like that." He tried scraping it off along one corner with a fingernail. When that failed, he slashed at it with the toothed side of his apartment key, but only succeeded in carving small strips out of the paper, and scratching the glass.

"Fuck it," he muttered, throwing his hands in the air. He'd take care of the glue with some hot water and a razor blade when he got home. There was no need to waste any more of his valuable time getting frustrated.

Arlen got into the car and immediately realized that not only was the notice stuck to his windshield, it was blocking part of his view. That, no doubt about it, had been the intention of the parking attendant—his little way of saying "That's what you get for parking your piece of shit in my garage."

"Goddammit," Arlen hissed. Well, he had to hope some cop out on the street didn't see that on the drive home. There weren't a hell of a lot of points left on Arlen's driver's license; one more ticket, and he'd end up having to get around by riding city buses. "Bunch o' motherfuckers."

Gritting his teeth, he turned the key in the ignition... and listened in horror as the Monte Carlo's engine coughed, sputtered, and died. A wisp of black smoke wafted up from under the hood.

Arlen closed his eyes and sighed wearily, then leaned forward to rest his forehead on the steering wheel. "Goddammit." he groaned.

The taxi cab driver dropped him off at The Imperial, then burned rubber getting out of the area. No surprise there; a lot of cab drivers didn't like cruising around Downtown, especially with sundown approaching. It wasn't as glamorous as the Strip, not once you

moved away from the Fremont Street Experience, and the chances of getting robbed were a lot higher than if they'd parked in front of the MGM Grand or the Riviera.

Arlen entered the lobby of the motel and walked up to the registration desk. Sitting behind the bulletproof glass was Jack Williams, the Imperial's daytime manager. He was a grizzled old bastard in his seventies, with deep age lines and creases in his face that looked like an aerial view of the Grand Canyon. The most noticeable and disconcerting thing about Jack was that he had a lazy eye, the left one. It tended to drift to the left, even as the right one looked straight ahead. Talking to him always proved a constant struggle for Arlen because Jack had a habit of moving his head back and forth when he spoke, so Arlen was never sure which eye he should be looking at.

At the moment, both eyes were focused on the screen of a small television located on a shelf below the counter. Arlen couldn't see what Jack was watching, but the old man was certainly engrossed by whatever program was on. A comedy of some sort, apparently; Arlen could hear a laugh track playing.

"Hey, Jack," he said. "Any mail today?"

"Nope," he said without looking up.

Arlen considered the vague answer for a second. "Nope' as in no mail came in today, 'nope' as in there wasn't any for me?"

"The second," Jack said brusquely, then gestured toward his television. "I'm tryin' to watch my show here. Ya mind?"

Arlen smiled without showing any teeth, and shrugged. "Nope," he said. "Sorry to bother you. Enjoy your show."

"Yeah, yeah," Jack replied.

Christ, Arlen thought, from the way he's so focused on the damn show, you'd think he was watching a presidential debate or something just as serious, instead of *Everybody Loves Raymond* or whatever he's got on.

He crossed the lobby to the elevator bay and pressed the call button. As the car made its way down from an upper floor, Arlen suddenly thought, What the hell am I doing? I almost got killed by one last night; now I'm ready to take my chances with another one?

The elevator arrived, and the door opened with a rattle of gears. The car was unoccupied. All ready for him to step inside alone. Into the trap. Step into my fuckin' parlor, why don'tcha, it seemed to say to him.

Arlen stood on the threshold for a few seconds, inspecting the safety bar, gazing down at the gap between the car and the lobby floor. He shook his head. "Uh-uh. No fuckin' way," he muttered, and pushed open the door to the fire stairs.

When he opened the door to the second floor, Arlen caught sight of Tina, the hot-looking Asian call girl he lusted after. She was fiddling with a key ring, about to enter the rented "office" in which she plied her trade. She seemed unaware of his presence, and he used the distraction to admire the tight, red latex miniskirt and matching stiletto-heeled boots she was wearing. He couldn't tell what kind of top she had on; a short, black velvet jacket covered her torso.

Eventually, she found the right key, slipped it into the lock and froze. It was like she could tell she was being watched. She turned, teeth bared in a confrontational snarl, only to rearrange it into a friendly smile as she recognized her silent observer. "Hi, Arlen!" she said brightly.

He smiled sheepishly and stepped in from the fire stair landing. "Hey, Tina. Just gettin' in?"

"Gettin' back, actually," she said. "Just stepped out for a bite. Of food, I mean." She winked, then gestured at his clothes. "You working at a hospital now?"

He looked down at the scrubs, then smiled. "No. Uh... it's a long story."

"I'm sure it's fascinating," she said, although her tone of voice told him she was only being polite. She wasn't really interested in hearing it. "And have you taken up exercising?" she asked, pointing to the fire stairs. "Or do you just like sneaking up on people?"

"Neither one, actually," he said awkwardly. "I had a... bad experience with an elevator lately."

Her eyes widened, and her hands flew up to the sides of her face. "Oh, my God, that's right!" She pointed at him. "You're one of those people who was on the elevator at the Tower! I saw you on the news!"

He nodded. "That's me."

"Oh, you poor guy," she said. "I would've been shitting bricks if it happened to me, you know what I'm saying? You must've been so scared."

He shrugged, trying to play it cool. "I didn't really have a chance to get scared."

"I bet you haven't had a chance to relax, either," she said.

"Yeah, there's been a lot more excitement lately than what I'm normally used to. I figured I'd maybe take the night off, y'know? I think the laundromat can get by without me for one evening." Another shrug, followed by a lopsided grin. "But, hey, you know me; usually I'm rush rush rush, always on the go."

She sidled up close to him. "Well, if you ever feel like slowing down for a little while and... relaxing with somebody," she said in a throaty whisper, "you know where to find me." She smiled slyly. "You know, I've never done anybody famous before."

"So, I guess that makes me your first, huh?" he replied, trying to match her seductive tone of voice. To his ears, though, it sounded like he'd just finished gargling with broken glass. Nevertheless, he closed his eyes and leaned forward to kiss her full lips. Hey, he figured, after the trauma I've suffered, what's wrong with gettin' a free taste?

But she suddenly pulled away, and he would have wound up sucking lead-based paint if he hadn't opened his eyes in time. "Oh, shit," Tina said, looking at her watch. "My six o'clock appointment's coming, and I'm not even dressed yet." She smiled apologetically. "Sorry, Arlen. I've gotta get ready."

He returned the smile, although his was a far weaker version. "Hey, I understand. You're a pretty busy person yourself."

"Oh?" She raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "You know that for a fact?"

He blushed and shook his head. "Not for a fact, no." He glanced at his feet, unable now to look her in the eye. "You just, y'know, look

like the busy type." That was a bald-faced lie, and both of them knew there was only one way he could be aware of the size of her clientele, and how many "appointments" she had in the course of an evening.

"Have you liked what you've been seeing?" she asked playfully.

He laughed nervously. "You're... well, it's kinda hard to miss. I mean, you could always close the curtains, or maybe turn out the lights."

"I like it with the lights on," she said with a smile. "But you know that already, don't you, you naughty boy." She tapped him on the nose and opened the apartment door. "You know, maybe you should come by for a visit later. There's a Japanese schoolgirl I know who's planning to drop by. You might've seen her hanging around before."

"Maybe," he admitted.

She leaned close to his ear. "I hear she *loves* to meet people who are famous," she whispered.

"Wh—" he croaked, his throat suddenly feeling very tight. "When?"

"Say, around nine?" She wiggled her eyebrows and grinned. "See you then." And with that, she stepped inside and closed the door.

"See you," he whispered. Slowly, as though in a daze, Arlen turned and headed for his apartment, walking down the hall with quite a bit of difficulty.

Warren knew exactly why he was willing to let Ploog go off on his own once they returned to Merlin's Tower, even though he'd promised to keep an eye on the little weasel. He was sick of looking at him. Still, he knew where to find Ploog if he needed to: his file was in the Metro database. And besides, Warren wanted to spend some time with Shawna. They hadn't had a moment to themselves since the shit had hit the fan last night.

That's why it came as such a surprise when she told him he should go back to work.

There had been an argument over that, as one would expect. The last place he wanted to leave her alone was where their troubles all started. And, not that he was willing to admit it to her, or anyone, for

that matter, but the van incident had him a little spooked, and he really didn't want her out of his sight. No, he still hadn't given any credence to Mrs Gaines's campfire ghost story about some mysterious force, maybe even Death itself, trying to kill them all because they'd gotten off the elevator. But... some really strange shit was going down, they *had* almost been killed. Twice. He didn't have a fucking clue how to even begin explaining it.

It was Shawna who had the last word, though. She'd sternly reminded him about his commitment to Danny Lavirra, to finding the child's killer, and that he still had a suspect to track down. And with Isabelle now laid up in the hospital, he'd almost have to work twice as hard. So, Shawna had given him a push back toward the parking garage and told him to get going. All she planned to do, she explained, was talk to her bosses and find out how the disaster was affecting the show, and her job. Then she was going to drive home to her apartment in Henderson and hug her cats.

Well, he knew better than to try and force the issue, so he did what he was told. Before he headed back to his desk at Homicide, though, there was the matter of ditching the emergency room togs and putting on some real clothes. And that meant a quick trip to his apartment.

And hour and a half later, he was sitting in the squad room, going over the Medical Examiner's report that had just been dropped off. There wasn't anything in its pages that he hadn't expected to see: the autopsy of Danny Lavirra had determined the boy had been savagely beaten, most of the blows delivered by a fist, the third finger of which sported a ring with a small hexagonal stone in its center; the shape of the gem was tattooed on the boy's skin. The ultimate cause of death was an intra-cerebral hemorrhage: bleeding inside the brain.

Warren tossed the report down and opened another folder that had been deposited on his desk. Haslinger and McBride had taken the reins on the case while he and Izzy had been... otherwise preoccupied, and they'd done quite a bit of follow-up. He skimmed over their summation of their stake-out of Carolina Lavirra's apartment building (Diaz had never shown up) their second canvassing of the neighborhoods, and a list containing Carolina's

telephone logs (known as LUDs, or Local Usage Details). One number in particular caught Warren's eye, and he thumbed through his notebook to see if he had anything that matched up.

There it was: the number for Diaz's cousin on Ogden Avenue. The same cousin who'd claimed he "didn't have no idea" where to find his elusive family member.

"Son of a bitch," Warren muttered. He stood up, ready to go running out the door, when a photograph mixed in with the paperwork drew his attention. A wallet-sized snapshot of Carolina, Danny, and Diaz that looked like it had been taken in one of those four-for-a-dollar photo booths you see in a pharmacy; a note paper-clipped to it explained the picture had been provided by Carolina. In it, the trio were crammed tightly together, with Danny kneeling in front and the adults sitting behind him. Diaz had his left hand resting on the boy's shoulder, and Warren's lips drew back in a feral snarl as he looked closely at the ring the man wore on his third finger.

A ring with a hexagonal stone in its center.

"Cocksucking bastard," Warren hissed. He turned and ran from the squad room, grabbing a two-way hand radio from a rack on the wall near the door as he went, so he'd be able to call in to the house if he needed assistance. Odds were good, though, that it would be Diaz who'd need help, if Warren got his hands on the child-killer.

By the time Milos Hewetson's call from Merlin's Tower was finally transferred to his extension, Warren was already burning rubber out of the parking lot.

NINETEEN

At the same time that Tom and Allie Gaines were explaining to a fire captain why their motel room had exploded, and Arlen Ploog was sitting in his apartment, casting furtive glances across the courtyard into Tina's place of business as the evening's festivities began, Warren was sitting in his car a few doors down the street from 1625 Ogden Avenue, waiting for Roberto Diaz to make an appearance.

It was one hell of a long shot, betting that Diaz had turned out to be too stupid to make tracks out of town while he had the chance, but it was all Warren had left. The cousin had no reason to call Carolina Lavirra, so logic dictated it must have been Diaz, checking in to see what kind of heat he was facing. Why the Clark County District Attorney hadn't moved yet on ordering a wiretap for Carolina's phone was anybody's guess; you'd think that a kid getting beaten to death would light a fire under anybody's ass. Maybe because it wasn't an election year.

Of course, the Tower disaster might have something to do with that, too. The city was in emotional turmoil, with folks either crying their eyes out or walking around like zombies, not knowing what might be coming next, and fearing the worst. And with Hotz stomping around, waving his badge and looking for terrorists everywhere, the inevitable comparisons to the World Trade Center kept popping up; hell, you couldn't help making them.

And yet, amid all the chaos, there was still the matter of a little boy whose body was lying in a drawer at the morgue. A little boy who deserved a chance to be at peace, who deserved to have his killer found.

Warren sighed. One last case, he swore. Just wrap this one up, give the poor kid some justice, and then sit down with Shawna and let her know you're leaving the job. He nodded, agreeing with himself. Maybe he'd even drive out to her place tonight after he saw how this surveillance went, just to make sure she was okay.

From the passenger seat, the two-way radio suddenly crackled. "Zebra three, Zebra three, please respond," said a deep male voice. It

surprised Warren, because it wasn't a police dispatcher who was calling; it was his boss, Captain Lou Summers.

Warren picked up the radio and pressed the "talk" button. "Zebra three. That you, Captain?"

"Yeah," Summers replied. "Look, Warren, I need to see you in my office right away. There've been some... recent developments."

"Oh?" Warren said. He didn't like the sound of the captain's voice; it sounded kind of ominous. "What kind of developments?"

"I'd rather not discuss it over an open channel," Summers told him. "Just get back to the station ASAP."

Warren frowned, and tapped the rubberized tip of the radio's antenna against his chin a few times. Something was going on. He clicked the "talk" button. "Look, Captain, I hate to be a pain in the ass, but I've got a possible lead on the Lavirra homicide. I don't think Roberto Diaz left town like we thought. I'm pretty sure he's holed up in his cousin's place on Ogden Avenue. I'm sitting on it right now."

"Forget it. I'll send Haslinger and McBride to your position. They can play babysitter while you get your ass back here. And I'll talk to the DA's office about a search warrant."

Warren sucked in a breath. Summers's insistence was starting to grate on his nerves. If there was a problem, and there had to be one, if he was acting so goddamn evasive, then why the hell didn't he just come right out and say it? "Captain, could you please stop beating around the bush and tell me what the hell's going on?" Oh, shit, he suddenly thought. "Is something wrong with Iz—with Isabelle?"

"No, Detective Montoya is fine; she's still at the medical center." He paused, and the silence was so long and so total that Warren thought the connection had broken. "Warren, there was an... accident at the Tower about an hour ago."

He felt the blood drain from his face. His hands began to shake, and he suddenly found it hard to breathe. Oh, God, please, he thought. "Is Shawna okay?" he asked, aware of just how high-pitched his voice sounded.

Another long, agonizing pause. "Warren, I'm sorry."

"NO!" he screamed, and slammed the base of the two-way against the top of the dashboard. "No, goddamn it, no!" he roared,

continuing to pound the dash with each syllable, every cry of outrage, until large plastic splinters started breaking off the radio. "No," he finally sobbed, and dropped the radio on the floor of the car. Then he draped his arms over the steering wheel, lowered his head, and wept.

It was his fault, he thought. His responsibility. He never should have listened to her, never should have left her alone. Not after the elevator. Not after the van. Not after that argument with Mrs Gaines in the emergency room, when she'd tried to get it through his thick skull that they were going to die because they were supposed to have perished in the elevator; because they had cheated Death, because the cosmic balance needed to be restored. But he'd refused to listen, refused to believe the premonition she insisted that she'd had was anything more than a bunch of New Age bullshit designed to shift attention away from her possible involvement.

"Cheating Death, huh?" he'd belligerently said to her at the hospital. "Well, we sure picked the right town to do it in, didn't we?"

But they hadn't been the ones who'd picked the right town. It was Death. His town. His game. His rules. Winner-take-all. And he was the one who was winning.

Warren suddenly remembered something he once saw on Izzy's computer in the squad room: a quote that popped up against a black background when the screensaver activated. A scientist named Stephen Hawking had said it, and since it somewhat related to gambling, the words had stuck in Warren's head: "Not only does God play dice with the universe, he sometimes casts them where they can't be seen."

And that sorta summed it up, now, didn't it? Life was nothing more than the ultimate crapshoot tournament between the Almighty and the Grim Reaper. People didn't die, they just got fucked because God had a bad roll. And sometimes He threw too hard and the dice fell off the table, and while God went looking for them, Death snuck out to grab up a few extra souls to build up his stakes. Like Danny Lavirra. Like Officer Murphy.

Like Shawna.

The sobs shuddered to a halt, but the ache in his soul still pulsed, still burned. He tried pulling himself together, but the shield he once

used to erect around his heart to protect himself, to hide his emotions, had been forever shattered. All he had now were the grief and the misery and the terrible sense of loneliness that had always lurked in the back of his thoughts; the pain of each day's burden that he had to shoulder, that her slightest touch could dispel.

But as he slowly raised his head off his arms and looked with tear-blurred eyes through the windshield, Warren realized there was one other thing he still carried within him. The one thing not even Shawna's love could completely ease.

His rage.

Roberto Diaz stepped out of his cousin's building and paused to look up and down both sides of the avenue. He'd changed his appearance slightly, losing the mustache and the five o'clock shadow, slicking his hair in a different style, but there was no mistaking the ring on his third finger. The ring with the hexagonal gem in its center.

The ring whose shape was tattooed across the lifeless body of a ten year-old boy. A boy who'd wanted to be a wrestler when he grew up. A boy who would now never grow up, never see another beautiful day, never experience the incredible, magical love of a woman, never.

Because Roberto Diaz had taken all those chances, all those possibilities, away from him.

Apparently satisfied that he wasn't under surveillance, Diaz started walking down the street, away from Warren. Where he was going, why he'd chosen this moment to come out of hiding, didn't matter; maybe God just felt like throwing Warren a bone after taking so much away from him. What mattered is that Shawna had wanted Danny Lavirra's killer brought to justice, and that's exactly what Warren planned on doing.

And if God were smart, He'd go looking for His dice before things got ugly.

Warren climbed out of the car and jogged down the street after his suspect. The wind had started whipping up for some reason (he didn't remember hearing any forecasts about high winds tonight) and scraps of garbage and loose sheets of newspaper swirled and

danced around him in the stiff breeze. He quickened his pace, then slowed when he'd closed within a few yards of the fugitive.

"Roberto Diaz!" he shouted. Diaz turned, and Warren held out his gold detective's shield. "Las Vegas Homicide. I wanted to talk to you —"

Where the gun came from, he didn't have time to assess; maybe the guy had had it stuck down the front of his pants. All he knew was that suddenly Diaz had a .38 in his left hand, and he was swinging it around to fire.

Warren dived to his left, between two parked cars, as three rounds tore into the pavement where he'd been standing. Another two ricocheted off the trunk of the car in front of him. He pulled his 9mm from its shoulder holster and slowly peered around the car's right turn signal, in time to see Diaz running away. People on the sidewalk scattered as they caught sight of the gun he was waving around.

Warren went tearing down the street after him, yelling at the bystanders to get the hell out of the way. It wasn't until he was halfway down the block that he realized he'd left the two-way radio in the car, and by then it was too late to turn around and go back for it. He'd have to make this collar without calling for backup.

For a heavy man, Diaz could move pretty fast; apparently, a lot of what passed for fat on first glance was actually muscle. Still, it was clear he didn't exercise that muscle too often, because he was quickly getting winded. Obviously, he was better at the hundred yard dash than a fifty meter race. Warren started closing the gap.

Diaz turned and fired, and Warren hit the deck, crashing into the side of a fruit stand that stood outside a small supermarket. Limes, a few papayas, and a handful of green plantains rained down on his head, but the downpour of fruit didn't prevent him from seeing Diaz duck into an alley near the corner of Cervantes Street.

By the time he reached the mouth of the alley, Diaz was gone. But "gone" didn't necessarily mean he'd already made it to the other end and split; there was always the chance he could be hiding somewhere, reloading that .38 while he waited in ambush for his pursuer. Cautiously, Warren moved in, trying to make as little noise as possible. That proved to be more difficult than he would have

liked; puddles of stagnant water were everywhere, and the alley was a minefield of broken glass bottles, rusted cans and pipes, cardboard boxes, and, strangely enough, an assortment of discarded children's toys. One toy in particular caught Warren's eye: a six-inch doll, or what the kids referred to as an "action figure", of a man in bright red and yellow tights, T-shirt and matching bandanna.

He walked farther into the alley and looked up. There were fire escapes all along the rear of the buildings on his left, but since none of the access ladders had been pulled down, it was doubtful that Diaz had managed to haul himself into one of the second-floor apartments before Warren's arrival. There were a lot of wires up there, too: a lot of illegal hook-ups leading to the electrical junction boxes of the buildings on the other side of the alley. Warren couldn't figure that one out; maybe the building owners *liked* having their power stolen.

A bottle shattered just around the corner of a right turn in the passageway. There was probably a door there that led into one of the buildings, and if Diaz was still around, he may have been trying to open it.

Warren eased forward, intending to sneak up on his quarry, but then the wind suddenly picked up, creating a miniature cyclone in the tight, narrow space. A page from a newspaper flew into Warren's face, and as he went to push it away, he lost his balance and kicked a can lying near his foot.

Shit! he thought, and threw himself to the other side. He splashed down in a large, urine-scented puddle just as Diaz came around the corner.

"Motherfucker!" Diaz bellowed, and aimed his gun at Warren, gang banger style: turned sideways instead of straight ahead, like a character in a Quentin Tarantino film would do.

Warren fired first, his five rounds all finding their marks, slamming into Diaz's barrel chest and spinning him like a top as the child-killer's shots went wild. Two ricocheted off the wall behind Warren, well above his head, and struck some of the illegal power lines; the third shattered a window on the third floor of the building Diaz had been trying to enter.

The big man staggered in a slow circle for a few seconds, eyes wide and staring, mouth moving soundlessly. The .38 dropped from his hand, to clatter on the pavement near his feet. Then he went down hard, a face-first dive to the piss-slicked concrete that shattered his nose and jaw, crushed his cheekbones and eye sockets. A fitting way to go, Warren thought, considering the damage the bastard had inflicted on Danny.

He slowly climbed to his feet, the 9mm still aimed at the unmoving killer. When he was satisfied Diaz wasn't getting back up, he lowered the weapon.

"Rot in hell, you stinking fuck," Warren said, and spat on the body.

He was going to catch all kinds of hell over this incident; he'd known that even before he'd jumped out of the car. Captain Summers wouldn't like it. The department brass wouldn't like it. The Mayor sure as shit wouldn't like it.

But Warren didn't give a rat's ass. He'd done what he'd said he was going to do: bring a child's murderer to justice, one way or the other. It was the promise he'd made to Danny; to Shawna. And he'd kept that promise.

But there was one thing that bothered him.

I still don't know *why* this fucker killed Danny. What set him off in the first place. He frowned. Shit. Guess I never will now. He shrugged. Yeah, well, at least the kid can rest a little easier. So can Shawna.

And that was when the wind again howled down the alley, this time with a gust powerful enough to reach up and tear loose the power lines damaged by Diaz's gunshots. Warren noticed the sparking cables as they began tumbling in his direction, about a second before he realized he was standing in a puddle of piss.

The first shock rooted him to the spot. Then the other lines struck the water and his gun, and a massive surge of electricity tore through his body, frying every nerve and synapse, setting his hair alight, roasting his skin, boiling his innards. His clothes burst into flame, the coarse smell of fibers mingling in the now-gentle desert breeze with the overwhelming stench of burning meat. Lights flickered and

died on both sides of the alley, just before the power finally, mercifully, shut off.

He was dead long before his blackened corpse crumpled to the pavement.

Death is a part of life.

Warren Ackerman must have heard that old cliché spoken a hundred times, if not more, during his time on the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department; it usually came up as part of the eulogies at funerals. But just because he'd heard it so often didn't mean it had lost its impact; not twenty years ago, when he was a rookie cop, and not now as a homicide detective. It was meant to bring some peace of mind to the families of the victims, a way of assuring them that their loved one's passing was just a part of some great cosmic balance: dust we were, and to dust we shall return. To Warren, however, it only meant they'd been cheated of their chance to live a full life. And he had no doubt that phrase would be dragged out once more for his dubious benefit; thankfully, he wouldn't be around to hear it.

As the light faded from his eyes, as the alley in which he lay and the pain that seized his body slowly became distant memories, Warren stared into the darkness, into the tunnel that now seemed to infinitely stretch out before him. He smiled, hoping that maybe Shawna would be waiting for him on the other side. He had so much he wanted to say to her, so much of his life he wanted to tell her about; all the things he had hidden away from her, all the things he thought he was protecting her from. Some of it would no doubt shock her; some of it would horrify her; some of the things he had done might even make her hate him.

For a while, maybe. But in the end, they'd work things out. They always had; they always would. Because no matter how bad things got, Shawna had been the one good thing in an otherwise miserable life filled with murder and violence and anger and grief; a light in the dark, showing him the way out. And he had been her rock, her

strength, her soulmate; an island of sanity in a crazy world. They were meant to be together. Always. Warren truly believed that; just another way of restoring the cosmic balance, was all it was. And not even that ghoulish prick, Death, could argue with that logic.

The darkness grew, and Warren could feel a light breeze blowing. It tousled his hair playfully, slid under his body, and seemed to gently lift him up. It held him in its arms for a moment, then started moving down the tunnel. Like it was carrying him away from this world of violence and grief.

Like it was taking him home.

He and Shawna had found each other once, Warren thought. They'd find each other again. He was sure of it.

And when they did, they'd have all of eternity to just sit and talk.

TWENTY

"What do you mean, you can't put me in touch with Detective Ackerman?" Allie demanded. "I have to talk to him. It's a matter of life and death!"

"I'm sorry, ma'am," replied the police operator, who'd been sounding ever more bored with the conversation as it progressed, "but Detective Ackerman is currently away from his desk and cannot be reached."

"But doesn't he have a cell phone, or a pager?" Allie asked. "I could get him that way, couldn't I?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am," the operator repeated, a little more forcefully this time, "but I'm not allowed to give out such personal contact information. If you'd like, I could contact you with his voicemail so you can leave a message."

"I've already left three messages for him!" Allie snapped. "He never calls back!"

"There's no need to raise your voice to me, ma'am," the woman commented sternly.

"You're right," Allie admitted. "I'm sorry."

"I understand, and I'm sure Detective Ackerman will contact you as soon as he can," the operator replied. "In the meantime, would you care to leave message for him?"

Allie sighed. "No, that's all right. I'll call back later. Thanks for your help."

"And thank you for calling the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department," the operator said. "Have a pleasant evening."

Allie switched off the cell phone and dropped it back in her purse. "Shit," she muttered, and walked back into the little waiting area outside the manager's office at the Budget Friend's Inn. Tom was sitting on a well-worn fake leather couch, watching a TV mounted on the opposite wall (similar to the one that had been in their room) with his feet resting on their scorched and scraped luggage. He looked more than a little exhausted, and was probably as hungry as she was; their Chinese food had been destroyed in the fire, so they'd

never had dinner. Instead, they'd spent over two hours trying to explain what had happened, first to the manager, then to the firemen who'd shown up in answer to the explosion. Saying their room had blown up because of a series of unfortunate events probably sounded like a bunch of crap to them; their angry expressions had certainly given that impression, but Allie had thought it'd be for the best if she didn't try going into the whole notion that perhaps she and her husband were being stalked by the Grim Reaper. About the only thing that had gone right for them was that Super-Nazi Hotz hadn't shown up to accuse her of accidentally detonating the terrorist bomb she'd no doubt been assembling to continue her reign of terror against the good citizens of Las Vegas.

"No luck, huh?" Tom asked.

"He's 'away from his desk,'" Allie replied, using the index and middle fingers of both hands to fashion quotation marks. "He's been away from his fucking desk all afternoon." She shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe that ride in the runaway van put the fear of God in him, and he's locked up in the john with the crazy shits."

Tom chuckled. "Or maybe he's just spending a little quality time with his dancer girlfriend," he commented with a sly grin.

Allie frowned. "Hey, don't think for a minute I didn't notice you checkin' her out when you thought I wasn't looking."

He shrugged. "Okay, so I'm busted. But don't try and convince me it's worse than some toothless old guy starin' up at your private parts from a motel parking lot."

She laughed. "That's still got you bothered, huh?"

He shrugged. "Not so much. Not as much as me starin' at a cop's girlfriend, apparently." He grinned, then turned to go back to watching the TV. The grin faded. "Hey, what's that?" he asked, pointing at the set.

Allie turned to see. The picture on the TV had changed to a graphic with the words "special report". It was quickly replaced with a camera shot of an anchorman sitting at a big news desk in a studio. He was in his late forties, with greying hair and a dark suit. A grim expression was etched on his face as he stared into the camera,

making the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes look even more pronounced.

"Good evening," he began. "Late this afternoon, tragedy struck once more at Merlin's Tower, scene of what some have come to call the 'Strip Maul Disaster', since an observation elevator broke loose and plummeted over one hundred stories onto Las Vegas Boulevard, shortly after 2:00am."

"Oh, Jesus, what now?" Allie whispered, her lips trembling slightly.

The anchorman paused, and looked gravely at the camera. "A warning to our viewers: The footage we're about to show you was taken by a guest of the hotel with a portable video camera, and was received only a short time ago by station management. It is of an extremely graphic nature, and has not been edited. If there are any small children in the room, or if you have a delicate condition, you may wish to look away."

The picture switched to a jerky, handheld shot of the interior of the Tower's casino. There was a large crowd gathered in the center of the vast room, looking in the direction of a mega-jackpot slot machine. The camera's operator began weaving his way through the masses, and the picture jerked and swayed.

"According to eyewitnesses," the anchorman continued in a voice over, "at around four o'clock, an automobile that was on display within the Merlin's Tower casino suddenly broke loose from its moorings and rolled down the main aisle. The Tower was in the process of transferring its guests to other hotels in the area, so the casino at that time was relatively empty."

The crowd parted, and the car that had been referred to appeared in the jittery picture: a shiny new Jaguar, from what Allie could see. The shot went all blurry as the person doing the recording zoomed in on something in front of the Jaguar. It looked like the top half of a human being, but it was hard to tell if it was a man or a woman.

Allie's stomach rolled over. I don't want to see this, she thought. I shouldn't be seeing this. And yet she couldn't stop watching.

"Unfortunately," said the anchorman, "one person was caught in the path of the automobile."

The picture sharpened to crystal clarity.

"Oh my God!" Allie screamed, her hands going to the sides of her face.

Beside her, Tom leaped to his feet. "Jesus fuck!" he yelled.

"Twenty-three year-old Shawna Engels was pronounced dead at the scene by the Clark County Medical Examiner's office," the anchorman said as he reappeared on the TV screen. Just to the right of his head, a professional looking headshot of a beaming Shawna popped up; the hotel had probably provided the station with it. "Engels was a dancer at *Magipalooza!*, the show currently running at the Tower. At this time, both hotel management and the show's producer have declined to comment on the incident, pending an investigation."

Allie fell to her knees. "No," she wailed, tears streaming down her cheeks. "No, no, no, no, no, no!"

Tom knelt beside her, and gently placed his hands on her shoulders.

"I knew it," she moaned. "I knew it was true. I said it was gonna kill everybody and I was right, goddammit I was right."

"Easy, Allie," Tom said soothingly. "Just take it easy."

She shrugged him off. "No!" she snapped. "Don't you see? It's gonna kill all of us. Shawna was just the first!"

"What?" Tom asked. "What's gonna kill us?"

"Death!" she roared. "It's Death, and it's coming after us because we wouldn't stay on that fucking elevator like we were supposed to!" She grabbed him by the shirt and shook him. "Don't you get it, Tom? Don't you understand? We were supposed to die in that elevator, but we got out because of that premonition I had before it happened."

"So, what're you saying?" he asked, clearly not getting it. "We cheated Death, and now he's trying to make up for it?"

"Yes!" she shrieked. "That's exactly what I mean!"

He frowned, then shook his head. "Aw, that's just nuts." He gestured at the TV. "I mean, that thing with Ackerman's girlfriend was an accident. The guy just said so."

"Really?" she said with a snarl. "Like the traffic light killing Officer Murphy was an accident? Or the van almost plowing into a tanker

truck? Or the shower trying to drown me? Or the blow dryer? Or the doors locking by themselves? Jesus Christ, Tom, wake the fuck up! Do you really think all the shit we've been going through since the elevator crashed is just some big coincidence?"

She could see him trying to work it all out in his head, trying to connect the pieces of the puzzle in order to see the big picture. Yes, she knew it sounded crazy, and she'd only half believed herself up until she heard the report about Shawna, but the evidence was right there for anybody who really wanted to see it. And then she could practically see the light bulb switch on over Tom's head as his eyes grew wide, and all the pieces finally came together.

"Shit," he muttered.

"Yeah, shit," she agreed.

"Jesus, Allie," he said. "What're we gonna do?"

She sniffed loudly and wiped her eyes on the sleeve of the grey sweatshirt she wore, then reached into her purse to pull out her cell phone. She dragged her runny nose across the heel of her hand, then punched in the number 411.

"Information," the female operator said when the call went through. "City and listing?"

"Yes," Allie said. "In Las Vegas. I need the number for an Arlen Ploog."

Oh, yeah, Arlen thought with a grin. This is exactly what I needed.

He lay back on the bed, eyes closed, his breath heaving into and out of his lungs with sharp, labored pants, and reveled in the moment. A moment that seemed as though it might last forever; he certainly hoped it would. Never in his life had he felt so totally relaxed. Well, maybe not totally relaxed; at least one part of him was tensed. But it was a good kind of tensed. The best kind.

Tina was a dark-haired enchantress, a high priestess of the Tantric arts, a veritable sexual goddess, and his body was the willing altar on which she practiced her strange and wonderful rituals. In fact, she was so good, so skilled in her carnal arts, that it seemed a damn

shame she didn't have a church or temple named after her. The things she could do with those healing hands, that serpentine tongue... well, in Arlen's opinion, it was as close to a religious experience as he was ever going to get in this lifetime. And if heaven was anywhere half as good as this, he was about ready to pack his bags, say his goodbyes, and jump on board the first available Greyhound bus that was bound for glory. Next stop: the Elysian Fields.

He'd lost count of the number of times she'd brought him to sweet release; of the number of times she'd restarted his engine every time he thought the battery was completely drained; of the number of positions they'd assumed. The woman was like a living copy of the *Kama Sutra*, with every description, every diagram committed to memory and put to incredible use.

Wow, and this is all because I'm a little famous because of the accident? Arlen thought, during one of the rare moments he was able to think clearly. Shit, I wonder what she'd be doing if I was *really* famous.

Out on Fremont Street, the wind suddenly picked up, and residents scurried for the safety of indoors. Anything not bolted down—traffic lights, trash cans, garbage, business signs, newspaper dispensers—began swinging and shifting and scuttling as the chilly night air whipped down the street.

Normally, the desert winds might not have been a problem for the Imperial's towering neon sign, but it was long past being the well-lit, brightly painted edifice it once had been. Decades of withering heat and drenching rains and even the occasional snowfall had eaten away at the structure in bigger and bigger bites, ultimately resulting in a weakened concrete base. When the wind was strong enough, as on this night, it had a tendency to sway from one side to the other.

The owners of the motel had known about the problem for a long time, had been warned about it on any number of occasions by any number of people who swore that one day the damned thing was

going to fall right over and kill somebody. And with a smile and a wink and a condescending pat on the head, the owners assured the residents they'd have a new base, or even a new sign, constructed. But, to no one's surprise, they just never seemed to get around to it.

Well, the residents wearily agreed, maybe when somebody *does* get killed because of that sign, things'll start changing around here.

There was some truth to that belief.

And the change wouldn't be long in coming.

The final blessing was about to be bestowed on him: the climax, both figuratively and literally, of the evening's libidinous service. With a light giggle, Tina slipped beneath the red satin sheets, and Arlen's back arched instinctively as her tongue began weaving its spell.

The trick for him, of course, was not to lose control too early. The kind of magic Tina practiced was slow and measured, a steady climb through escalating levels of stimulation designed to raise him up, then hold him until she was ready to bring him down. She'd do all the work; all he had to do was hang on and remember to keep breathing.

He let out a moan guaranteed to rattle the windows. There, he thought. There it is! There it is there it is oh Jesus God Almighty there it is—

Then the wall that faced the courtyard seemed to explode inward as the Imperial's neon sign crashed into the apartment.

What happened next was as unexpected as it was sudden. Arlen slid upward on the bed as he automatically pulled his legs together. His knees slammed hard into the sides of Tina's head.

And there was a loud crunching noise from under the sheets.

It took a second for the pain to register, but then he howled with all the force of a soul damned to eternal suffering. The sheets wiped back as Tina jumped up, spat something over the side of the mattress, and screamed. Arlen looked down on the bed.

There was a pool of blood around his legs, growing ever larger as the sanguinary river that had formed it continued to flow. And it was all coming from him. From where his manhood had been.

He screamed and grabbed his crotch, but the blood continued to flow, and he felt a strange coolness prickle his skin, like a light breeze was caressing his body. Or like the hand of Death had gripped his shoulder.

He stumbled out of the bed and collapsed on the floor, suddenly no longer able to stand. "Tina," he moaned. "Tina, for God's sake, help me."

But Tina was gone. A trail of bloody footprints led to the front door, which stood wide open. It was obvious that the last place she planned to be when the cops arrived was in the same room as a john who was bleeding to death. She hadn't even bothered to get dressed.

Maybe, he thought dimly, she would've hung around... if I'd been more famous.

Arlen Ploog was Death Incarnate, at least according to his monthly bank account statements. Put a pair of dice in his hand, give him a questionable tip about an upcoming horse race, unwrap a fresh deck of playing cards within fifteen feet of him, and you could practically hear his savings beg for mercy as their financial life was drained away, sometimes in a matter of hours. But it was more than merely his finances that were draining away—it was his life.

And as he lay dying on the floor of his former goddess's temple, as he stared across the courtyard into his apartment and hazily thought he could hear his phone ringing, an odd memory popped into Arlen's mind; one that somehow seemed appropriate, given the circumstances. A recollection of an article he'd read years ago that mentioned the French term for orgasm. It was their poetic way of describing that instant when the world falls away at the height of passion and the ego, the self, is submerged. When the body ceases to exist, and all that remains is that brief moment of supreme ecstasy.

They call it *le petit mort*: the little death.

TWENTY-ONE

The cab came to a stop a block away from the Imperial motel, and Allie and Tom climbed out. It was as close as they were going to get to their destination, what with the wooden police barricades blocking the street.

"You sure you folks want to get out here?" the driver asked. He looked the couple up and down. "It's not exactly your kind of neighborhood, if you know what I mean. Especially at night."

"You offering to wait for us?" Allie replied. "We should only be a few minutes."

The driver laughed sharply. "I'd love to help you, but I have this weird aversion to getting shot." He gave them a brief salute. "You folks have a nice night. Stay safe."

The cab turned around and drove off, leaving the couple in the middle of the street. Allie looked at the sizeable crowd that had gathered along the barricade line. There must have been over a hundred people, and all of them were jostling for a better view of the evening's activities.

Beyond the wooden horses, the street was filled with emergency vehicles, with cops, firemen, and emergency medical technicians moving back and forth between a mobile command center and the Imperial. At least Allie thought it was the Imperial. The location matched the address she'd been given by the information operator, but there was an open area near the building where, Allie assumed, the hotel's neon sign must have been. She could see chunks of its crumbled base scattered around.

She turned to an elderly black woman in a rose-patterned summer dress. "What's going on?" she asked.

"The hotel sign fell over," the woman replied without facing her. She swayed side-to-side, then stood on her tiptoes, trying to get a better look. "Always heard folks say that was going to happen sometime. It's just a miracle it didn't fall in the street and kill a bunch of people."

"Was anybody killed?" Allie asked.

The woman shrugged. "Don't rightly know. But I don't think you could have something like that," she gestured toward the vacant area formerly occupied by the sign, "come crashing down without *somebody* getting hurt."

As if on cue, a pair of men who looked like EMTs emerged from the hotel lobby, pulling a stretcher between them. But if the body bag on that stretcher was any indication, they were more likely from the coroner's office than a hospital, and their patient's next stop was the morgue, not the emergency room.

And to Allie, a dead person at this particular location could only mean one thing.

"Oh, my God," she said. "He's dead, too. I know it."

"Oh, come on, Allie, you *don't* know that," Tom said. "Besides, *how* would you know? You have another one of those premonitions again?"

"No," she said sullenly.

"Then you don't know for a fact that Ploog is dead," he countered. "Maybe that's not even him on the stretcher. Come on, there could be a hundred reasons why the cops are here. This is supposed to be the bad side of town, remember? It could be somebody got shot in a drive-by shooting, or there was a drug deal that went down wrong, or maybe it's got something to do with that whole East Coast/West Coast rap war the news is always talking about."

She glared at him. "We back to relying on coincidence to try and explain shit, when we both know what's really going on?"

He shrugged. "Hey, it's all I've got."

"Yeah, well, it's crap," she replied. She looked around and spotted a police officer standing near the barricades. "I'll be right back," she said to Tom.

With a little bit of polite pushing and shoving, she wound her way to the front of the crowd, up to where the cop was located. The little brass name-plate pinned to his uniform shirt identified him as Officer Ferguson.

"Excuse me, officer," Allie said. As he turned to face her, she put on her brightest smile and stood a little straighter, pushing her chest

out so he'd get a good look at her boobs. Hey, she thought, sometimes you gotta use the tools you're given to get what you want.

He smiled and stepped over. "Evening, miss. Is there something I can do for you?"

"I was just wondering if you know what's going on over there," she said, gesturing toward the hotel. But he knew where she was pointing; that's why his attention was focused instead on her tits.

He looked up and blushed, knowing he'd been caught staring. "Uh... some guy died. I don't know the whole story, I'm just here for crowd control."

"Do you know who it was?" She batted her eyelashes at him and smiled sweetly. From the corner of her eye, she could see Tom sidle up behind her.

"I heard he might be one of the people mixed up in the Merlin's Tower thing," Ferguson shrugged. "But as for why a high-roller like him would be over in *this* part of town." He shrugged.

Allie started to reply, but her throat suddenly felt bone-dry. "Th-thank you, officer," she croaked.

The two-way radio on Ferguson's belt crackled to life. "Central, this is One-Ezra-Sixteen. I have an officer down in the alley off Cervantes and Ogden," another male police officer was reporting. Allie leaned forward so she could hear better. "Repeat: officer down in the vicinity of Cervantes and Ogden."

"Does the officer require medical assistance?" the police dispatcher asked.

There was a pause. "No, Central. Request a medical examiner's van to the scene."

Allie bit her bottom lip. God, no, not again, she thought.

"One-Ezra-Sixteen, can you identify the officer?"

The cop mumbled something Allie couldn't understand. Apparently, neither could the dispatcher.

"One-Ezra-Sixteen," she said a bit louder. "Can you identify the officer?"

"Umm..." Allie heard the cop say. "I... I can't be sure, Central; his body's burned up pretty bad. But... I think it's Detective Ackerman."

A boulder settled in Allie's stomach. She turned to stare at Tom. He looked almost as bad as she felt.

"Oh," she said, "we are so fuckin' outta this town."

She never really talked about it, hadn't even really thought about it in a few years (well, not until she'd gotten to Vegas), but Allie Goodwin knew what it was like to die. She hadn't cared much for the experience, and didn't have any immediate plans to repeat it—not for another sixty or seventy years, if she had her way. Of course, as it had been so brutally made clear to her over the course of a single day, what she wanted and what the universe had planned for her were two totally different things. All part of that "cosmic balance" Detective Ackerman had mentioned to her... before his life and Shawna's, and Ploog's, had been taken to help adjust the weights on the scale. At this point, all she could do was hope that Death might get bored chasing after her and Tom and go bother somebody else.

After all, he hadn't really shown that much interest in her the last time.

"That night", as she later came to refer to it, happened on a New Year's Eve, of all times. The year 2000 was coming to a close, and Allie—then a junior at St Tulan College in Grossett, Ohio—had decided to ring in the start of the new millennium at a party hosted by Jeremy Moore, a senior whose rich parents were away for a skiing holiday in Aspen, Colorado. Normally, she would have spent the evening with her family. But celebrating the end of another year by sitting in front of the TV, watching the ball drop in New York's Times Square while they sipped apple cider from cheapo plastic champagne "glasses," had lost its appeal when she turned sixteen. Jeremy's party, on the other hand, had been the talk of the campus for the past month as *the* place to be, and Annie wasn't about to miss out on the fun. She would have brought Tom along, but he and his parents had gone to Chicago to welcome 2001 with his dad's parents and some family friends. So, with some pleading and nudging, she finally

convinced her best friend, Talia Kraft, to tag along, promising her it would be a night to remember.

She just never expected to be the reason *why* the night would be so memorable.

Things started well enough. There were plenty of people on hand, plenty of good food and, more importantly for her at that time, plenty of quality alcohol to be consumed. It was exactly the type of social gathering that should have made Allie forget her troubles for at least a few hours; the constant arguing with her parents, the threats they'd made over Christmas of having her institutionalized, "for her own good", if she didn't curb her wild behavior. It should have, but it didn't take long for the downhill slide to start.

The concept of "binge drinking" had been fairly unknown to her back then. She thought consuming large quantities of alcohol, all in one sitting, was just something frat boys did as part of an initiation ritual. She'd seen Tom try and put most of a keg of beer down his throat once or twice and then had run for the hills when it came rushing back out in a Cheetos-tinted torrent of hops and barley. The New Year's party, however, gave her the chance to experience it firsthand for herself.

She started with a Tanqueray martini, followed by a glass of German beer, a couple shots of Jamaican rum, and, to finish up her "world tour" of alcohol, some Bailey's Irish Cream. Six drinks in a row, without pause, without food. The cumulative effect was that she was certainly feeling no pain; her ongoing battles with her family were reduced to a dull ache in the back of her mind.

Then, she figured, why stop at simply dulling the pain when there were so many "magic elixirs" available that could eliminate it completely? Don't fuck with Grandma when she needs to take her medicine, she snapped at quite a few people after they'd let her know that maybe she needed to cut back on the sauce before something tragic evolved from her bingeing. Even Jeremy had come up to her just before midnight and warned her that he wasn't going to be responsible for anything that happened to her that was caused by her own stupidity.

Allie had laughed in his face. She could handle her liquor just fine, she told him, and if he didn't believe her, he could just go and fuck himself. Or maybe even fuck *her*, if he was interested. Y'know, alcohol really *did* do wonders for making ugly people more attractive.

When she finally woke up in the intensive care unit of the local hospital, New Year's Eve had come and gone, the ball had long fallen in Times Square, and she'd been unconscious for two days. Talia showed up in the afternoon to relay all the details of what had almost been her best friend's last night on Earth. How Allie had crashed through the big glass coffee table in the Moore's living room, fractured her skull, and bled like a fountain, right at the stroke of midnight. How her heart had stopped (twice) in the ambulance on the ride to the emergency room. How the doctors had declared her clinically dead for about five minutes. And how her heart had suddenly started beating again, all on its own.

Allie didn't remember any of that. The time she'd spent in limbo was one big black hole in her consciousness, and one she never tried to think about too much in the years that followed.

Still, it gave her a helluva story to shock people with whenever they asked her to talk about *that night*. And she liked to end the tale by making the observation that the Grim Reaper had had a golden opportunity to claim her soul, but for some reason he'd let her go, looked the other way and let her have a chance to pull her fucked-up life together. Maybe, she'd say, he hadn't been interested in some drunken college girl with an attitude problem. Or maybe it just hadn't been her time to go.

And maybe, as Allie thought about it, the reason he was coming after her so hard was because he wanted to make up for lost time.

The rented, four-door Nissan Altima cruised along Interstate 15 at sixty mph, heading west toward the California border. At this hour of the night, it pretty much had the road all to itself, vehicles being few and far between as 2:00am approached. Tom had thought it a little

crazy that they should set out for Barstow at such a late hour. But Allie had made it very clear that she wasn't about to spend another night in Las Vegas when Death was so successfully stalking their little band of Tower survivors at every turn. Three down, two to go and all that. And she sure as hell wasn't going to sit around another hotel room and wait for the bastard to try blowing them up again.

And thus began the secret midnight desert migration of Almarine and Thomas Gaines to the far safer (at least to their minds) environs of friendly Southern California.

"You know that Agent Hotz isn't gonna be happy about this," Tom commented as he drove. "He *did* warn us not to leave town."

"Fuck him," Allie replied sharply. "He's not the one fearin' the Reaper."

Tom glanced over at her. "I thought you weren't supposed to do that."

She looked over, not having a clue what the hell he was talking about. "Do what?"

"Don't fear the Reaper," he sang off-key, and grinned.

She shook her head. "Asshole," she said, then turned away so he couldn't see her smile. She'd walked right into that one, hadn't she? Well, that was all right. At least he hadn't launched into a rendition of "We Gotta Get Outta This Place". She'd had enough of that particular song to last her a lifetime. If she never heard it again, even as a karaoke number in a bar, she'd consider herself one happy girl.

"So, how's it feel, being a fugitive?" Tom asked. "I mean, I figure once Hotz learns we've busted out, he's gonna put out some kind of APB to have our asses dragged back to Vegas."

"Let him," Allie said. She grunted. "Paranoid son of a bitch. After what happened to Shawna and Ackerman and Ploog, how the hell could he still get the impression we're some kind of terrorists?"

"Because we're the only ones still alive?" Tom asked. "Because we took off after he warned us not to? Because we're heading for the California border in the middle of the night?" He looked over and shrugged when he saw her annoyed frown. "Hey, you asked."

She folded her arms across her chest and pouted. "Yeah, well, thanks for putting everything into perspective, Mr Logical," she

muttered.

"Oh, shit!" Tom shouted, smacking his palm against the rim of the steering wheel.

"What?" Allie asked.

"I never even got to go see the *Star Trek* Experience!" Tom exclaimed. "Goddammit!" And he slapped the wheel in frustration again.

Allie laughed softly, grateful to know it wasn't any *real* emergency. She reached over to place her hand on his arm. "Well, maybe once all this shit blows over and we get back home, we can talk about creating a *Star Trek* experience all your very own." She flashed a wicked little smile and raised her right eyebrow in her best Leonard Nimoy imitation. "If you know what I mean... Captain."

"I thought you weren't into wearing 'tin foil,'" he commented.

Both eyebrows rose. "Are you seriously gonna be dumb enough to try and talk me out of it now, after all the whining and moaning you were doing?"

"What?" he asked, his voice jumping a few octaves. "I was *not* whining."

"Okay, begging, then," she replied, then shrugged. "Same difference, y'know? It's all just a matter of seman—"

And that was when the left rear tire blew out.

The car jerked and shimmied from one side of the lane to the other, but Tom was an experienced enough driver that he was able to maintain control until he could bring the Nissan to a stop. Still, whether or not her husband was experienced behind the wheel, Allie had watched his struggles in complete horror, certain that Death had finally tracked them down, and she waited for the moment when the car would flip over and crush them. It wasn't until the vehicle had rolled to a halt that she was able to pry her fingernails out of the imitation leather passenger seat, and try to slow the pounding of her heart.

Tom let out a sigh of relief. "Holy shit," he said. "Some ride, huh?"

"Yeah," she replied, putting on a brave face. "I think you left my stomach about a half-mile back."

"I'm sure we can find you a replacement when we get to Barstow," he commented. "They have pancreatic houses there, right?"

"No, those are pancake houses," she corrected him.

He closed his eyes and smiled in his goofiest manner. "Mmm... pancakes," he moaned, and licked his lips. He opened his eyes, and then his door. "Well, lemme go see what the problem is."

"The problem is I just got the absolute shit scared out of me," she said.

"Good!" he said brightly. "Then you'll have more room for all those tasty pancakes in Barstow!" He pulled a small flashlight from a utility pocket built into the door, and stepped out of the car.

Allie followed suit, feeling a sudden urge to stretch her legs... and maybe find a way to calm down. Maybe, she thought, I just want to put a little distance between me and the 'Deathmobile' for a few minutes before we get going again. She nodded, agreeing with herself. It sounded like a good plan.

"Tire's blown," Tom said from the other side of the Nissan.

She strolled over to find him crouching by the left rear tire. Clasping her hands behind her back, she leaned over the left corner of the trunk to inspect the damage, as Tom held up the flashlight and poked at it with his index finger. The tire was a shredded mass of rubber strips wrapped around a steel rim. It wasn't just blown, she thought. The damn thing looked shredded. What could they have possibly driven over to cause that much of a mess?

Could be the Reaper has a set of those road spikes the cops use to stop cars, suggested the little voice in the back of her head. Maybe you should go back and check. Shut up, she told it. I'm scared enough already. I don't need you adding to it.

"Can you fix it?" she asked Tom.

He shook his head. "Nah. I'll just get the spare outta the trunk. Ten minutes, tops, and we'll be outta here." He stood up. "I'm gonna need you to hold the flashlight, though."

"Yay, me," she said, hiding behind a smile. "I get to be helpful."

Tom walked back to the driver's door and leaned in to pop the trunk release. As he walked back, Allie gazed at their surroundings.

It was pitch black all around; an eerily quiet desert landscape full of strange silhouettes, void of any sort of illumination except for what the stars provided. And there were so many stars out, she noted; a sky brimming over with them. There was no light pollution out here, miles from the neon streets of Las Vegas, nothing to block out the awe-inspiring sight of a universe stretched out before her.

But having no artificial lighting available also posed something of a problem for the potential driver stranded out in the middle of nowhere. It meant that other approaching drivers might not be able to see them standing on the roadway until it was too late.

Tom opened the trunk and pulled out the spare tire. He rolled it around to the side of the car, then went back for the jack.

"Tom, are we on the road, or the shoulder?" Allie asked. She looked up and down the highway. From what she could tell, they'd come to rest on the downward side of a bend in the road. That meant they were in a blind spot.

Her husband waved around the flashlight, aiming the beam at the ground. "The shoulder, I think," he replied. "It's kinda hard to tell. You gonna give me a hand?"

"Sure," she responded slowly. She looked back at the curve once more, then turned her attention to holding the flashlight.

Tom used the jack to raise the car, then he set about removing the blown tire. "On the run and stuck in the middle of nowhere," he said pleasantly as he worked. "Not exactly how I pictured us spending our honeymoon." He looked up and grinned broadly.

Allie couldn't help but laugh. It all sounded so ridiculous, when you stepped back to look at everything they'd been though in less than a week. It was like they were stuck in some reality show from Hell, with the grand prize being that they'd be allowed to keep on living. Well, as gruesome as it sounded, they'd managed to outlive the other unwilling contestants, more by luck than any real skill, so that must mean they'd won. Right?

Sure hope we don't get picked up for a second season, she thought with a grin.

And that was when she heard the music.

A familiar throbbing bass line that echoed across the desert, that called to her from inside the car. The huskily delivered lyrics seemed to speak directly to her. They talked about being young and pretty, and dying before your time was due.

A chill ran through Allie's body. She'd never turned the radio on the entire time they'd been on the road. There was no way it could be playing. And yet it was. But it wouldn't for long.

She stepped around the rear of the car and stomped toward the passenger door.

"Hey, Allie, what're you doing?" Tom said from the darkness. He sounded annoyed. "I need the freakin' light over here if you expect me to finish changing this tire."

She was just turning back to rejoin him when she saw the headlights.

They were big and round and bright as twin suns, and there was no doubt in her mind that they belonged to some massive eighteen-wheeler speeding through the Nevada night. That was okay, though. As Tom had assured her, they were parked on the breakdown shoulder, off the highway and out of the truck's path. There was no reason to worry.

But then the jack holding up the Nissan suddenly collapsed, and the car slammed down. Instinctively, Tom jumped back to get away from it and landed right in the roadway.

"Tom!" Allie screamed, running toward him as the semi roared around the curve.

Then the pitch-black desert was filled with the light of twin suns exploding.

EPILOGUE

She had just returned home from the funeral when the phone rang.

Allie wasn't in any mood to answer it. The service for Tom had been a nerve-wracking experience for her, full of tension and bitterness, and she'd driven back from the cemetery feeling physically and emotionally drained. Like the wake held over the two days preceding the burial, it had been a closed casket affair; there hadn't been much left of Tom that anyone would have wanted to see, anyway. She tried to pay her respects, but his parents had treated her like a pariah, refusing to talk to her or even accept her condolences. Even some of her closest friends had gone out of their way to avoid her, both in the church and at the gravesite. She'd known what was going on right away, but what had surprised her the most was that she'd been naïve enough to not expect something like it to happen.

She knew they blamed her for everything: the Tower disaster and all that followed, especially Tom's death, and resented her for being the lone survivor. It should have been you, their accusing stares told her. You should have been the one who died, not Tom. He was a good man, a decent man, while you're just a...

A what, she wondered? A freak? A jinx? An unstoppable fuck machine?

The memory of that bizarre comment Tom had made back in their room at the Tower, the morning after the wedding, brought a smile to her face; the first in days. No surprise there, she thought. There wasn't much to be happy about.

She hadn't told the Gaineses about the marriage. They hated her enough already; she didn't need to add to the grief, theirs *and* hers, by trying to explain what had motivated them to tie the knot, however briefly. She'd taken the rings and the marriage certificate and stuck them on the shelf at the top of her bedroom closet, and there they'd remain. It would be her secret, one she'd take to her...

One she'd keep to herself.

It tore her up inside, not being able to tell anyone. How could she? A drunken proposal, an equally drunken acceptance, a ceremony

presided over by Elvis Presley (okay, just a lookalike). It was a cheap and tawdry thing to do. A poorly thought-out action that seemed like it had been borrowed straight from the pages of a bad romance novel. One that could have been a potential embarrassment to both their families.

And she'd come to love every second of it.

They'd grown close in Vegas, closer even than when they'd been a couple back in college. Being stalked by the specter of Death might have had a lot to do with that,

She looked at the ring finger on her left hand; instead of a gold band, there was only pale flesh to mark where it once had been. She rubbed the area between the thumb and forefinger of her right hand. It felt strangely, disturbingly... numb. Like there was a part of her that was missing. A part she'd never get back.

"You think you've got yourself a good man to watch out for you, you hold onto him tight," Ethel had told her in the Tower's lobby, a lifetime ago.

I tried, Ethel, she thought. I really did try.

She'd contemplated suicide a few times, but after all she'd been through, after all the fighting she'd done to stay alive, killing herself seemed like a ridiculous idea. It was all a part of the survivor's guilt she was feeling, her therapist had explained to her. All part of the healing process. It was only natural to wonder why, out of all the people who'd faced death during those tragic days in Las Vegas, she had been the one who lived.

But Allie knew why she'd survived. She'd beaten Death. Cheated him out of the last soul on his list. Come out the winner in the ultimate high-stakes poker game.

Hadn't she?

She picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Mrs Gaines?" said a woman's voice on the other end of the line. "This is Dr Coburn, from Valley Medical Center in Las Vegas. I treated you and your husband in the Emergency Room?"

Allie nodded. "Yes, of course. How are you, doctor?"

"I'm doing well, Mrs Gaines. And you?"

"I..." Allie felt her throat tighten up, "...could be better, I suppose. I just came from Tom's... From my husband's funeral."

"Yes, I'd heard about your accident," Coburn replied, her voice tinged with concern. "I'm terribly sorry."

Allie sniffed as her nose started to run, and wiped the snot away with the heel of her left hand. "Thank you." She paused. "Is there something I can do for you, doctor?"

There was a momentary silence. "Mrs Gaines, do you remember the tests we were in the process of running for you and your husband?"

A cold weight started to form in Allie's stomach. "The ones for HIV?" she asked slowly.

"Yes," Coburn replied. "I just received your results, and..." She fell silent.

"And?" Allie said, aware of how shrilly it came out.

"I'm sorry, Mrs Gaines," Coburn said. "Your test results came back positive."

Her first impulse was to throw up. It wouldn't have taken much effort; she could already taste the acid-laced bile lapping against the back of her tongue. She fought it down, though the burning sensation never left her throat.

"No, wait, wait, wait!" she said hurriedly, desperately. "I thought you said any results wouldn't be accurate, that it could take up to six months for the infected cells to start appearing."

"I said the tests might be inconclusive," the doctor corrected her. "But Officer Murphy's blood *was* infected with the virus, and according to the results of your test, it's been passed on to you. It's a strong positive. Very strong." She paused. "To be honest with you, Mrs Gaines, I've never seen results like this before. Without treatment, HIV normally takes about ten years for the virus to progress to full-blown AIDS. But the laboratory assured me the test was run three times, and from what I'm seeing here—"

"How... how long do I have?" Allie croaked. It was hard for her to speak, hard for her to get her brain to process the information.

"You should talk to your physician, Mrs Gaines," Coburn replied. "If they start you on a program of anti-retroviral medications

immediately, there's a good chance the progress of the virus can be slowed."

"*How long?*" she screamed.

"I don't know," the doctor said.

It wasn't fair, she thought. It just wasn't goddamn fair! She'd won, she'd beaten Death, hadn't she? He'd taken all the others—why did he still need to come after her?

"Mrs Gaines?" Coburn said. "Are you there?"

Allie hung up without answering, then flung the phone across the room, to shatter against the wall. The strength seemed to drain from her legs, and she flopped down on the edge of the couch. It took her a second to realize that the reason her cheeks felt like they were burning was because she was crying.

She hadn't beaten Death, hadn't cheated him. He'd known what cards he dealt her when she sat at the table; she just hadn't looked at them closely enough. Then he had allowed her to walk away for a time, to take a short break between hands at this high-stakes poker game and let her think she'd won the final round. But there was no winning in this game, only varying degrees of losing, and the last hand had been played without her ever knowing it.

It was strictly business, she thought with a strange calmness, nothing personal. Just the Grim Reaper's way of balancing the books, of putting in order some records that had momentarily been misfiled. Or, as Detective Ackerman would have put it, of "restoring the cosmic balance".

Sure, there were drugs with which she could fight the disease, but they weren't a cure, only a delaying tactic meant to prolong her life until one could be found. But how long would she have? Months? Years? Did it really matter? At least in her case, death was a certainty; the time it took to get there was inconsequential. The Reaper would collect his winnings, get his missing soul, then move on to another city, another game.

There were plenty of games out there to be played. And there were plenty of other gamblers ready and willing to sit down at the table and try their luck, right? A whole world of them, in fact. And it didn't

matter how many hands it took in this never-ending, globe-hopping tournament he conducted because in the end, Death would win.

He always won.

This time, she did throw up. What little food she'd had to eat since yesterday's breakfast came rumbling out of her throat like steam from a geyser. It stained the sofa cushions and the living room carpet; spattered white and green and orange chunks across her black, full-length skirt; painted the edge of the coffee table with bacon bits and what looked like lumps of cottage cheese.

Allie sank to her knees on the floor, her body wracked with fever and aches and terrible cramps. Never before had she wanted to die more than at this very moment.

A soft breeze drifted through the apartment, although she didn't remember having left any of the windows open when she went to attend Tom's funeral. It stroked her tear-stained cheeks, her mucus-coated lips, cooled her burning forehead with its gentle caress. And as a chill ran up her spine, and the flesh on her arms turned into goose pimples, Allie Gaines, nee Goodwin, came to realize that she now truly knew what people meant when they said they had felt the touch of Death.

And knew right away just how truly screwed she was.